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THE INSTITUTION OF ENVOYS WITH HOMER – ORIGIN OF DIPLOMACY IN ANTIQUITY

The institution of envoys emerged in times immemorial. It was quite developed in the ancient East, which is confirmed by numerous written documents. Suffice it to mention the truce between the Egyptian and Hittite kingdoms of Ramses II and Hattusili III, which is one of the best examples of international law.¹ The truce signed in the 13th century BC made a fundamental change in the policy of confrontation and put an end to a futile war that lasted 17 years.

It is noteworthy at the same time, that the institution of envoys took a distinct shape with all its nuances in ancient Greece. It was the institution of envoys developed in Greece that was inherited first by Rome and then the whole of Europe. Although the Greek language did not have a word equivalent to the modern term of diplomacy, Greeks nevertheless managed to develop the kind of activities that can be described as diplomacy, which included methods of resolving conflicts peacefully, the art of holding negotiations and searching for ways of agreement between sides in conflict, establishment of allied relations, exchange of envoys, etiquette, oratorical skills, and other terms linked to this field of activities.

The term "diplomacy" is derived from the name of envoy's document (δῖπλωμα) traced back to late antiquity. The document was used as a travel

¹ Межгосударственные отношения и дипломатия на древнем востоке. Ответственный редактор Стучевский И. А. Наука, Москва 1987, 79; Darsania N., Pharaoh Ramses II. Tbilisi 2007, 77-78; Giorgadze G., The Acadian Version of the Truce between Ramses II and Hattusili III, Georgian Diplomacy, Annua, 3, edited by Roin Metreveli, Tbilisi 1996, 16.

"passport" and enabled its holders to cross borders and visit foreign countries.²

The epic by Homer is of a paradigmatic importance for looking into the stages of development of the foreign relations service in ancient Greece and the Greek culture in general. Hence, it is a most important source for us too. It is interesting to see how Homer managed to place quite a specific sphere – diplomacy – in the context of his poetic world. It is noteworthy that ambassadorial affairs are quite comprehensive in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It is known that the functions of envoys and their missions in post-Homer Greek society were quite differentiated, which is confirmed by the special terminology linked to the phenomenon.

About 10 words denoting "envoy" can be found in Old Greek: ἄγγελος, ὁ ἄγγαρος, ὁ κήρυξ, ὁ πρεσβευτής, ὁ ἀγγελιαφόρος, ὁ περιφθεῖς, ὁ θεωρός, ὁ διάκτορος, ὁ ἀπόστολος and ὁ ἡμεροδρόμος. At a glance, they seem to be synonymous, but they are quite different in meaning. Of course, it is now difficult to define the precise meaning of each term or the time of their emergence, but one thing is definitely clear: back in the times of Homer, words of this group were used quite frequently. Although some of them are used in the meaning we are now considering with authors of later periods, it is possible to assume that the words were used in the colloquial language earlier too. As time passed, their semantic side underwent changes that may seem insignificant now.

Homer mostly uses two of the aforementioned words: ἄγγελος and κήρυξ and διάκτορος is a substantivized adjective, which is confirmed by the expression used to describe Hermes: "διάκτορος Ἀργειφόντης". This expression is used to denote the messenger of gods, it seems to have the meaning of someone showing the path.³

Being an envoy as a function is clear-cut with Homer. The notion implied not only messengers, who communicated news, but also people dispatched as ambassadors to fulfil a special mission. As regards ἄγγελος, which was mostly used for gods' messengers, it could have had a broader meaning of informers or reporters, which is confirmed by the fact that Homer used the verb ἀγγελλω and the form ἀγγελίης "being a messenger,

² Der Naue Pauly, Enzyklopädie der Antike, H. Schneider, Stuttgart, Weimar 1991, 683.

³ Autenrieth/Kaegi. Wörterbuch zu den Homerischen Gedichten. Stuttgart und Leipzig, 1999¹⁴, 64.

ambassador".⁴ The word is used in *Iliad* five times (III, 206; IV, 384; XI, 140; XIII, 252; XV, 640) in the meaning of acting as ambassador.⁵

Ἄγγελίην ἐλθόντα σὺν ἀντιθέω/Ὀδυσῆϊ
(Came as envoy with godlike Odysseus)
Il., XI, 140

Ἄγγελίης οἴχνεσκε βίη/Ἡρακλείη
([Periphetes] went as an envoy to mighty Heracles)
Il., XV, 640

In the antique era, the words acquired concrete semantic overtones. A lot of words linked to the activities of envoys in general – both nouns and verbs – were derived from ἄγγελος. In addition, composed words with the stem were also quite frequent in Old Greek. Some of them were found only in Old Greek, others in the Byzantine era, and Modern Greek has inherited most of them.

The word used more frequently than others (90 times) in the epic by Homer is κήρυξ. Correspondingly, its semantic is quite broad, which points to the comprehensive nature and importance of the function of messengers. In poems, messengers are usually noble mortals, who serve kings or noblemen. Homer did not use a special word for the news or information conveyed by messengers. Presumably, words denoting it – κήρυγμα, κηρύγμα and others – emerge no earlier than the classical era. The word κηρύγμα was first used by Sophocles (*Ihn.* 13, ect.) to denote a statement or message conveyed by a messenger. The law Creon issued in *Antigone* by Sophocles is called κηρύγμα:

καὶ νῦν τί τοῦτ' αἶ φασι πανδήμωι πόλει
κήρυγμα θεῖναι τὸν στρατηγὸν ἀρτίως ...⁶
(And now what new edict is this of which they tell,
that our captain hath just published to all citizens?)
Antigone, 8-9

As time passed, the frequency of the use of this word increased and its meaning also became broader. In Modern Greek, κήρυγμα means "public statement, announcement; preaching."⁷

⁴ Liddell H. G., Scott R., Jones H. St., McKenzie R., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1996, 7; Passow F., *Handwörterbuch der Griechischen Sprache*, Leipzig 1841, 11.

⁵ Gehring A., *Index Homericus*, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, New York 1970, 4.

⁶ Sophoclis *Tragoediae*, vol. II, Edidit R. D. Dawe, Leipzig 1985, 47.

⁷ *Scholia Vetera*, ed. P. N. Papageorgiou, Leipzig 1888, fr. 314.

In Greek literature and sources, Greek envoys are often referred to as *πρέσβεις*. This word is derived from *πρέσβυς* (Nom. pl. *πρέσβεις*, which means "old, aged". It is noteworthy that Homer used it as an adjective and not in the meaning of "envoy". In poems, we can see only the feminine form of the word – *πρέσβα* (γ 452). The poet also uses its comparative and superlative forms – *πρεσβύτερος* and *πρεσβύτατος*.

πρεσβύτερος δε; σὺ ἔσσι ...
 (You are older [than Achilles])
Il. XI, 787

Words derived from *πρέσβυς* underwent certain evolution. Along with the meaning of "elder, oldest", *πρεσβύτερος* was also used in the meaning of "most respected, most important". The word united everything linked to respected titles and missions. In Sparta, *πρέσβυς* was a political title.⁸ It was from this root that a word denoting envoy – *πρεσβευτής* – was derived later. In plural, it had the form of *πρέσβεις* (more seldom *πρεσβευται*). The word – *πρεσβευτής* – gradually became used in sources in this unchanged form. Its meaning became narrower and came to denote "envoy" in Modern Greek. Words composed and derived from *πρέσβυς* emerged in the language with semantic links to the function of envoys and professional diplomacy.

Thus, the terminological analysis has shown that with Homer, the function of envoys had gone quite far even at the level of nuances. It is also noteworthy that it is difficult to divide with Homer messengers and envoys in the modern sense, as *ἄγγελος* and *κηρύκες* fulfilled the functions of envoys and there was no term at that time to denote professional envoys. It emerged later albeit the functions and obligations of envoys are quite diversified in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

It is particularly interesting that with Homer, any prominent figure can assume the responsibilities of an envoy, doing so in accordance with the requirements of the moment. The 9th song of *Iliad* is a good example to illustrate this, as it mentions a representative group of envoys comprising non-professionals. Agamemnon sent mediators to convince enraged Achilles to participate in the war. It is noteworthy how the aforementioned group is staffed. Nestor mentions envoys, who he regards as best. He names Phoenix "loved by gods" (*δίφιλος*) as the leader, then "great" (*μέγας*) Ajax and Odysseus "equal to gods" (*δῖος*). All the three

⁸ Liddell H. G., Scott R., Op. cit., 1462.

selected personalities have different functions. Odysseus is the most experienced and astute. Phoenix is a friend of Achilles' father and he cannot be rejected. And Ajax is an incarnation of courage, whose straightforwardness and sincerity are highly assessed by Achilles. Homer recognizes the possibility of any prominent personality acting as an envoy. The poet uses the epithet κλητοί "selected, renowned" for all the three. However, at the same time, he makes an allusion to professional envoys. In the poem, Talthybius, Eurybates, and Idaius are messengers with special functions and titles. Homer describes them as "messengers of Zeus and men" (Διὸς ἄγγελοι ἦδε καὶ ἀνδρῶν). At the same time, there are also messengers in the poem with the main function of just conveying a message.

One more issue that is of importance in this connection is the immunity of envoys. They are the people who enjoy protection from Zeus. Traditionally, messengers were believed to be coming from the divine ancestry of Zeus and their role was of particular significance in the developments.⁹ It follows that they were under the protection of the supreme god, not the international law. It is noteworthy that not a single episode can be found in the poem, where envoys are insulted or come under physical pressure even in most extreme situations. In the first song of *Iliad*, Agamemnon sends his personal envoys – Talthybius and Eurybates – to Achilles to deliver Briseis. Although Achilles is infuriated because of Agamemnon's behaviour and the envoys themselves are afraid of meeting Achilles, the latter is quite polite towards the mediators. Achilles' address bears obvious signs of reverence and even respect for them.

Χαίρετε, κήρυκες, Διὸς ἄγγελοι δεῖ καὶ ἀνδρῶν ...
 ("Cheer up, heralds, messengers for gods and men")
Il., I, 334

Achilles notes that it is the son of Atreus who should be blamed for the capture of Briseis, not he. It is clear that a long tradition of receiving envoys existed in Greece, because even in such a critical situation, Achilles is reserved and expresses his benevolence towards them. There are a lot of such examples in antique literature, which may mean that the rights and inviolability of envoys (in modern terminology – immunity) were guaranteed although it emerged later as a legal norm.

Homer knew that there must have been some criteria to select envoys. The criteria could be different: in some cases, professional experience and

⁹ Adcock S. F., Mosley D. J., *Diplomacy in Ancient Greece*, Thames and Hudson 1975, 183.

wisdom and in others, personal experience gained with age. Envoys dispatched to Achilles were selected precisely on the basis of these criteria. However, the envoys were also accompanied by two professional envoys – Odius and Eurybates, who do not interfere in the conversation with Achilles and do not express their position.

A third important factor characteristic of envoys is eloquence. In this regard, speeches made by Phoenix and Odysseus are excellent examples of Homer's art of rhetoric. Although the speech by Ajax is quite short compared with the two, it has quite a significant impact on Achilles due to its straightforwardness. Interestingly, professional and non-professional envoys are never young in the epic. Homer regards experience, wisdom, and age as particularly important. It is noteworthy that in later ages, people under 50 were never regarded as candidates for becoming envoys.¹⁰ This is probably how the term "elder" – *πρεσβευτής* – emerged with another meaning of "respected". In addition, an envoy was to be a calm, considerate, reasonable person with good oratorical skills.

In Homer's poems, there are envoys among both mortals and gods. Although every god can act as an envoy and they do so too, professional envoys can also be found in the divine circles. They are Hermes and Iris (*ἀλλ' ἀγαθὰ φρονέουσα: Διὸς δέτοι ἄγγελος εἶμι* – "I come with a message from Zeus who cares," Iris says; *Il.*, XXIV, 173.) They are protected by Zeus personally, serving him when performing their duties. All that happens in the poem is linked to "fulfilling Zeus' will".¹¹

Homer gives examples of long speeches (Phoenix) and very short ones. However, messengers are able to convey information in such a manner as to cause amazing emotions in the other side. It is known that except for rare exceptions, most tragic scenes did not take place in Greek tragedies before the eyes of viewers.¹² It was messengers, who had the mission of communicating news about some trouble and they were supposed to impress viewers verbally, speaking in detail and emotionally. Homer seems to be describing messengers' speeches with particular skill. Of course, a question arises whether it was so necessary for Homer to depict professional messengers as skilful orators, as none of the professional messengers made long speeches in the poem. Their obligation was to

¹⁰ История дипломатии, том 1, под редакцией В. П. Потемкина, Москва 1941, 38.

¹¹ Gordeziani R., *Greek Literature. Epic, Lyric Poetry, and Drama of the Hellenic Era*, I, Tbilisi 2002, 105.

¹² Gordeziani R., *Op. cit.*, 313.

convey information precisely, which was often achieved through short phrases.

In the following ages, the functions of orators and envoys were clearly divided in the Greek culture. Orators could assume diplomatic functions in some cases, but professional diplomats did not try to excel in eloquence. In Homer's epics, it is also clear that professional envoys fulfil only the missions commissioned by rulers. They do not have the right to make long speeches unlike ordinary heroes, who become envoys only in certain situations. However, it is also noteworthy that in such cases, people are more impressive, because they are free. The speech by Priam, who visits Achilles for his son's dead body, is a good example in this regard.

Thus, it can be said that with Homer, the institution of envoys is a kind of system that has distinct shapes both in terminology and functions. Relations between polises in ancient Greece promoted further development of diplomacy and can be regarded as the establishment of diplomatic relations on a micro system. What took shape at the level of polises gradually rose to the level of Hellenic and non-Hellenic levels, acquiring a truly global nature after the formation of the Roman state. My opinion is that, the experience of ancient envoys is quite interesting for the development of modern international relations, as a lot of interesting connections can be found between modern diplomacy and its ancient prototype.