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Diplomatic Transformations after the Rise of Macedon up to the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BC)

Ali Raad Raouf Al-Saadoun, Prof. Dr. Hussein Nour Jalal Al-A'raji

^{1,2}Wasit University, College of Education for Human Sciences

araad4957@gmail.com

onor@uowasit.edu.iq

ABSTRACT: This study examines the transformations in the Greek diplomatic system following the rise of Philip II of Macedon, tracing developments up to the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC. It argues that inter-polis relations shifted away from the traditional principle of balance of power toward a new order shaped by Macedonian hegemony and expansion. The research identifies four interconnected processes underlying this shift: the collapse of the balance among the major Greek city-states (Athens, Sparta, and Thebes) due to successive wars and exhaustion; a growing crisis of diplomatic trust that rendered treaties, truces, and alliances temporary and unreliable; the transformation of embassies and diplomatic missions into instruments of internal political struggle, particularly in Athens, where rhetoric and factional rivalry compromised the neutrality of envoys; and the gradual decline of the concept of polis independence in the face of a more centralized and organized Macedonian model. The study concludes that Macedonian ascendancy was not the product of military force alone, but also resulted from the internal disintegration of the traditional Greek diplomatic system, which Philip II skillfully exploited through negotiation, alliance-building, and intervention in the domestic politics of the city-states. This process culminated in the Congress of Corinth, which formalized the transfer of diplomatic and political leadership from the individual poleis to a centralized Macedonian authority.

INTRODUCTION

This study addresses the transformations that affected the Greek diplomatic system following the rise of Philip II. Relations among the Greek city-states were no longer based on the traditional principle of balance of power; rather, they gradually became subject to the logic of Macedonian political hegemony and expansion. This shift gave rise to a new diplomatic pattern that combined military force with political maneuvering and intervention in the internal affairs of the Greek city-states. This new diplomatic approach was guided by a central principle, namely, the dismantling of the traditional diplomatic system of the Greek city-states, which was manifested through several principles:

1. THE COLLAPSE OF THE PRINCIPLE OF BALANCE AMONG THE GREEK CITY-STATES:

The traditional Greek political system was based on the principle of balance among the city-states. There was no unified central authority imposing absolute hegemony over the Greek world; rather, political relations were managed through a complex network of alliances, truces, embassies, and temporary agreements among major powers such as Athens, Sparta, and Thebes. Despite its persistent instability, this balance helped preserve the Greek poleis as relatively independent entities, each possessing the right to manage its internal and external affairs in accordance with its own interests. However, the fourth century BC

witnessed the gradual collapse of this principle, resulting in the disintegration of the traditional diplomatic system and paving the way for Macedonian hegemony⁽¹⁾.

The collapse of this balance began with Athens' political and military decline following the Peloponnesian War, in which the city lost much of the naval and diplomatic influence that had previously enabled it to lead alliances and shape the Greek balance of power. Athenian diplomacy, which had relied on an extensive network of allies and commercial interests, was no longer capable of imposing its will as it had in the fifth century BC. It consequently shifted from an expansionist policy based on influence to a defensive policy aimed at preserving what remained of its position within the Greek world. Thus, Greece lost one of its most important powers capable of maintaining the political balance among the city-states⁽²⁾.

In contrast, Sparta was unable to fill this vacuum in a stable manner, despite its military victory over Athens. Sparta relied more heavily on military superiority than on building a diplomatic system based on political acceptance and stable alliances. As a result, many city-states came to view Spartan hegemony as a threat rather than as legitimate leadership. Moreover, Sparta's continuous intervention in the affairs of other city-states intensified anti-Spartan sentiment and created opportunities for new powers to challenge its dominance. Accordingly, Spartan influence was based more on coercion than on long-term diplomatic consensus⁽³⁾.

Thebes emerged as a rising power that sought to reshape the balance of power within Greece, particularly after succeeding in weakening Sparta. However, its rise was both rapid and limited, as it failed to establish a stable network of alliances capable of ensuring the continuity of its influence. Thebes became embroiled in exhausting conflicts that drained its military and political capacities, while the other city-states were unwilling to accept its hegemony easily because of the enduring mindset of traditional rivalry among the poleis. Consequently, Thebes declined from a rising power into an exhausted city-state, unable to maintain the balance it had sought to impose⁽⁴⁾.

The most serious consequence of this situation was the absence of a power capable of maintaining the political balance among the Greek city-states. Each city increasingly sought to protect its own interests without the existence of a stable diplomatic system to regulate relations among them. Instead of serving as instruments for maintaining the balance of power, alliances became temporary arrangements that changed according to circumstances and interests. Treaties and truces likewise lost much of their political value, as the city-states no longer trusted that other parties would remain committed to them⁽⁵⁾.

This disintegration weakened the overall structure of Greek diplomatic relations, as embassies and political missions came to operate within a world dominated by suspicion, divisions, and longstanding conflicts. The city-states were no longer capable of formulating a common collective policy in response to external threats, because internal rivalry was stronger than the idea of Greek unity. Macedonia began to exploit this political vacuum, gradually intervening in Greek affairs as a power capable of imposing the stability that the city-states had been unable to achieve on their own⁽⁶⁾.

This phase also revealed a profound transformation in the nature of the Greek political system. After having been based on the plurality and balance of powers, the system gradually shifted toward the concentration of authority in the hands of a single power possessing both military capability and diplomatic skill. Philip II recognized early on that the collapse of the balance among Athens, Sparta, and Thebes meant that the Greek world had become open to a new political project based on centralized hegemony rather than the traditional balance among the city-states⁽⁷⁾.

(1) Frank William Walbank, *The Hellenistic World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p 19.

(2) Donald Kagan, *The Fall of the Athenian Empire*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1987, pp. 102.

(3) Simon Hornblower, *The Greek World 479–323 BC*, 4th ed., Routledge, London, 2011, p. 245.

(4) Raphael Sealey, "Demosthenes and His Time: A Study in Defeat", *Phoenix*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1969, p 203.

(5) Robert M. Errington, "Macedonia, the Greeks and the Rise of Philip II", *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1976, p 20.

(6) Ellis, J. R., "Philip II and Macedonian Imperialism", *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 1977, p 336.

(7) Worthington, Ian, *Philip II of Macedon and the Greeks*, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1986, p 90.

2. THE CRISIS OF DIPLOMATIC TRUST AND THE FAILURE OF TRADITIONAL TRUCES AND ALLIANCES:

The crisis of diplomatic trust among the Greek city-states produced one of the most prominent manifestations of the disintegration of the Greek political system in the fourth century BC. As relations among the city-states lost the foundation upon which traditional treaties, truces, and alliances had been established⁽⁸⁾.

This crisis became particularly evident in the frequent violation of treaties and agreements among the Greek city-states. Treaties no longer represented long-term political commitments; rather, they often became temporary means of halting warfare, reorganizing power, or gaining time. Whenever the balance of power shifted, the city-states would reinterpret, disregard, or directly violate agreements whenever they deemed such actions to serve their political and military interests. This behavior weakened the authority of treaties and deprived them of their traditional role as instruments for regulating relations among the poleis⁽⁹⁾.

This situation led to the failure of traditional truces to achieve stability. A truce, which was supposed to establish a period of de-escalation and negotiation, became merely a temporary interval between two conflicts, used for rearmament, realignment of alliances, or preparation for a new round of warfare. Consequently, truces lost their original political significance, as the parties no longer viewed them as a pathway to peace but rather as a tactical phase within the continuation of conflict. This, in turn, caused relations among the Greek city-states to remain in a constant state of tension and uncertainty⁽¹⁰⁾.

As for the traditional alliances, they too experienced a profound crisis as a result of conflicting interests and the absence of mutual trust. The city-states entered into alliances out of fear or immediate self-interest rather than on the basis of a shared political project or a lasting commitment. Consequently, alliances were quick to disintegrate whenever political or military circumstances changed. Moreover, the long history of conflicts among the city-states caused each side to distrust the intentions of its allies and to fear that they might turn into adversaries at any moment⁽¹¹⁾.

This crisis revealed a profound structural flaw in the political organization of the Greek world, because a diplomatic system cannot function without a minimum level of trust among the negotiating parties. When the city-states lost confidence in their agreements, they simultaneously lost their ability to establish a stable collective policy or to confront external threats in a unified manner. Consequently, the Greek city-states became more preoccupied with their internal conflicts and temporary alliances than with preserving the independence of the Greek system as a whole.⁽¹²⁾ Macedonia benefited greatly from this crisis, finding itself confronted with a fragmented political world whose city-states were unable to establish a united front because of accumulated suspicions and longstanding disputes. While the Greek city-states hesitated to trust one another, Philip II was able to employ diplomacy, negotiations, and temporary alliances to gradually isolate his opponents, taking advantage of the fragility of relations among the poleis. Thus, Macedonian expansion was not merely the result of military superiority; it was also a consequence of the collapse of diplomatic trust that had traditionally constituted the foundation of political relations among the Greek city-states.⁽¹³⁾

The crisis of diplomatic trust and the failure of traditional truces and alliances were among the most significant factors contributing to the collapse of the Greek political system. Treaties became temporary instruments of self-interest, truces turned into brief intervals between wars, and alliances became fragile arrangements subject to changing interests and circumstances.

⁽⁸⁾ Worthington, Ian, Philip II of Macedon and the Greeks , p 91.

⁽⁹⁾ Ryder, T. T. B., "The Nature and Development of the Peace of Common Peace in Greece" , *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1960, p 129.

⁽¹⁰⁾ عبد العزيز صالح، تاريخ اليونان القديم، ص 312،

⁽¹¹⁾ أحمد عثمان، تاريخ اليونان السياسي والحضاري، دار المعرفة الجامعية، الإسكندرية، 2003، ص 228.

⁽¹²⁾ رمضان عبده علي، تاريخ اليونان في العصر الكلاسيكي، دار الوفاء لدنيا الطباعة والنشر، الإسكندرية، 2010، ص 92.

⁽¹³⁾ محمد سهيل طقوش، تاريخ اليونان القديم من أقدم العصور حتى الفتح الروماني، دار النفائس، بيروت، 2013، ص 271.

Consequently, the Greek world lost its ability to maintain its internal balance, thereby paving the way for the rise of Macedonia and its eventual dominance over the political and diplomatic sphere⁽¹⁴⁾.

3. THE TRANSFORMATION OF EMBASSIES AND DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS INTO INSTRUMENTS OF INTERNAL POLITICAL STRUGGLE:

By the late Classical period of Greek history, embassies and diplomatic missions no longer performed merely their traditional function as means of communication and negotiation among the city-states. Instead, they gradually became instruments of internal political struggle within individual cities. Diplomatic decisions became closely linked to the nature of factional divisions and disputes among orators and political elites, making embassies part of the competition for power and influence within the poleis themselves. Consequently, foreign relations became a direct reflection of the internal crises experienced by the Greek city-states during the fourth century BC⁽¹⁵⁾.

Political divisions within the city-states contributed to weakening the neutrality of diplomatic missions and their representative function. Some advocated resisting Macedonian influence, while others viewed accommodation with Macedonia as a means of ensuring stability or securing domestic political gains. Consequently, embassies sometimes came to represent the interests of a particular political faction or group rather than the collective will of the city as a whole⁽¹⁶⁾.

This situation made envoys and ambassadors vulnerable to persistent political accusations, particularly accusations of treason, bribery, and compromising the interests of the city. When an ambassador returned with an agreement that did not satisfy one of the political factions, it was easy for him to be accused of having yielded to pressure from opponents, accepted financial inducements, or placed his personal interests above those of the polis. As a result, the embassy shifted from a diplomatic function focused on negotiation and protecting interests to an arena for internal conflict and accusations exchanged between rival factions⁽¹⁷⁾.

Orators and politicians also played a significant role in shaping diplomatic decision-making within the Greek city-states, particularly in Athens, where political life relied heavily on rhetoric and persuasion within the popular Assembly. An orator was not merely a transmitter of information; rather, he could shape public opinion and influence attitudes toward war, peace, or alliances. Political rhetoric was sometimes used to incite opposition against envoys, discredit the outcomes of diplomatic missions, or promote particular policies that served the interests of a specific political faction⁽¹⁸⁾.

Diplomatic relations increasingly became subject to internal political influence and political passions rather than being guided by a stable strategic vision. A city whose political elites were divided over the nature of its relations with external powers became less capable of making decisive diplomatic decisions or establishing long-term alliances. Consequently, agreements were often rejected or modified as a result of shifts in the political balance within the city itself, rather than solely because of changes in external circumstances. Demosthenes was therefore one of the most prominent leaders who continued to advocate for and promote sustained relations between the Greek city-states and external powers.⁽¹⁹⁾

External powers, particularly Macedonia, recognized the nature of these divisions and benefited greatly from them. Some political factions and orators within the Greek city-states became more receptive to the Macedonian project than to their own domestic opponents. This enabled Philip II to intervene indirectly in the political affairs of the city-states by supporting

(14) عبد العزيز محمد صالح، تاريخ الحضارة اليونانية، مكتبة الأنجلو المصرية، القاهرة، 1998، ص 334.

(15) أحمد عبد الرحيم مصطفى، تاريخ اليونان السياسي والحضاري من الحروب الفارسية إلى الفتح المقدوني، دار المعرفة الجامعية، الإسكندرية، 2007م، ص 291.

(16) Worthington, Ian, Demosthenes of Athens and the Fall of Classical Greece, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p 98.

(17) عبد الكريم حسن، "الحياة السياسية في أثينا خلال القرن الرابع قبل الميلاد وأثرها في العلاقات الخارجية"، مجلة كلية الآداب - جامعة بغداد، العدد 87، 2008م، ص 115.

(18) Josiah Ober, Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989, p 104.

(19) محمد سعد عبد الله الشهراني، تطور مفهوم الدبلوماسية في بلاد اليونان والشرق الأدنى، ص 25.

particular factions or winning over influential figures. Consequently, embassies were no longer merely instruments of negotiation between independent political entities; rather, they became means of penetrating the internal political structures of the poleis⁽²⁰⁾.

This transformation revealed a profound crisis within the Greek diplomatic system, as the success of diplomacy depends on a certain degree of internal consensus regarding the city's vital interests. However, factional divisions and personal rivalries turned foreign policy into an extension of domestic political conflict and weakened the city-states' ability to confront external threats in a unified manner. Consequently, diplomatic missions operated within an environment dominated by suspicion, rivalry, and fear of political accusations⁽²¹⁾.

4. THE DECLINE OF THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE OF THE CITY-STATE AMID THE RISE OF CENTRALIZED POWERS:

The decline of the concept of political independence of the city-state was one of the most significant transformations witnessed by the Greek world in the fourth century BC. The traditional system based on the independence of the polis gradually began to lose its viability in the face of the rise of more organized and expansive centralized powers, most notably Macedonia. The city-state had constituted the fundamental unit of Greek political life and possessed the right to manage its internal and external affairs independently, including forming alliances, declaring war, sending embassies, and concluding treaties. However, the political, military, and diplomatic developments that preceded the Battle of Chaeronea gradually weakened this concept and created the conditions for the emergence of a more centralized political system⁽²²⁾.

The traditional Greek system was based on the idea of maintaining a balance among independent city-states, ensuring that no single power could impose absolute hegemony over all the others. Greek diplomacy operated within this framework, with relations among the city-states relying on negotiations, alliances, truces, and political conferences. However, the continuation of internal conflicts among Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and other city-states exhausted the poleis and weakened their ability to safeguard their political independence. As wars and divisions became increasingly frequent, the poleis became less capable of managing their affairs without the intervention of external powers⁽²³⁾.

Macedonia emerged as a model distinct from the traditional polis system. It was not merely an independent city-state competing with other cities within the Greek balance of power; rather, it was a kingdom characterized by strong central authority, an organized army, unified political leadership, and a greater capacity to manage alliances and foreign relations in a more stable manner. This centralized organization gave Macedonia a clear advantage over the divided Greek city-states, as political decisions were made by a single authority capable of pursuing long-term planning, unlike the poleis, whose decisions were often shaped by factional conflicts, political rhetoric, and continual changes within their popular assemblies⁽²⁴⁾.

The rise of centralized powers brought about a profound transformation in the nature of diplomacy itself. Whereas political relations had previously been conducted among independent units of relatively comparable strength, they increasingly came to operate within a new framework in which centralized powers imposed the rules of the political game on smaller city-states. Consequently, the concept of the absolute independence of the polis gradually declined, as the city-states were no longer able to make their foreign-policy decisions freely as they had in the past. Instead, they were compelled to take Macedonian interests into account and adapt to the new balance of power⁽²⁵⁾.

⁽²⁰⁾ Errington, Robert M., *A History of Macedonia*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990, p 84.

⁽²¹⁾ Carl Roebuck, *The World of Ancient Times: Greece and Rome*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1966, p 214.

⁽²²⁾ مفتاح محمد الشاعري، النظام السياسي في اليونان القديمة وتحولاته في القرن الرابع قبل الميلاد، مجلة البحوث التاريخية، جامعة قارون، العدد 24، 2002م، ص 77.

⁽²³⁾ Hamilton, Charles D., *Greek Interstate Relations in the Fourth Century B.C.*, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 1981, p 398.

⁽²⁴⁾ محمد سعد عبد الله الشهراني، تطور مفهوم الدبلوماسية في اليونان والشرق الأدنى، دار المعرفة الجامعية، الإسكندرية، 1997م، ص 352.

⁽²⁵⁾ Carl Roebuck, *The World of Ancient Times: Greece and Rome*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1966, p 228.

Many Greek city-states began to view centralized authority as a means of ending the persistent disorder and divisions that had afflicted the Greek world for decades. The exhaustion resulting from repeated wars led some political forces to favor strong leadership capable of providing stability, even at the expense of part of the city-state's traditional independence. The rise of Macedonia, therefore, was based not solely on military coercion but also on exploiting the crisis of the old system and its inability to achieve lasting political security⁽²⁶⁾.

This transformation became particularly evident after the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC, when Macedonia emerged as the dominant power in the Greek world and political and diplomatic leadership shifted to it. Whereas the city-states had previously managed their relations according to the principles of balance and independence, they now operated within a new system led by a centralized authority that imposed limits on the political and diplomatic freedom of all. Thus, the Greek world entered a new phase in which the position of the independent polis declined in favor of larger entities characterized by centralized organization⁽²⁷⁾.

It can therefore be argued that the decline of the concept of political independence of the city-state was not solely the result of military defeat, but rather the outcome of a prolonged crisis that affected the Greek political and diplomatic system. Internal divisions, the failure of alliances, the erosion of trust among the city-states, and the inability of the poleis to confront external threats collectively all contributed to weakening the traditional notion of independence itself. In contrast, centralized powers, particularly Macedonia, succeeded in presenting a new model based on unified authority and more effective political, military, and diplomatic organization, enabling them to exert influence and establish stability⁽²⁸⁾.

Macedonian influence gradually came to appear acceptable to certain factions, rather than being perceived as a direct invasion from the outset⁽²⁹⁾.

CONCLUSION

The policy pursued by Macedonia revealed a significant development in the concept of diplomacy during the Macedonian period. Diplomacy was no longer merely a means of preserving the traditional balance among the city-states; rather, it became an instrument for reshaping that balance and bringing it under the authority of a new centralized power. Macedonia employed embassies and negotiations to advance its political objectives and consolidate its influence over the Greek city-states. One of the most prominent manifestations of these transformations was the transfer of diplomatic leadership to Macedonia. Following the Battle of Chaeronea, the Greek city-states lost much of the freedom of political action they had previously enjoyed. Alliances, treaties, and political conferences increasingly took place within a framework determined by Macedonia rather than according to a free balance among independent city-states. The Congress of Corinth represented the culmination of this new system, as relations among the Greek city-states were organized under direct Macedonian leadership. This development confirmed the transfer of political and diplomatic authority from the polis to the centralized state⁽³⁰⁾.

The transition of the Greek political system from a balance among the city-states to centralized Macedonian hegemony was the direct result of a prolonged crisis that had affected the Greek diplomatic system. Wars, divisions, the failure of alliances, and the erosion of trust among the city-states led to the collapse of the traditional balance of power. Meanwhile, Macedonia succeeded in exploiting this disintegration to establish a new political system based on centralization and unified leadership. Thus, the era of independent poleis came to an end, giving way to a period of Macedonian hegemony that reshaped political and diplomatic relations throughout the Greek world.

(26) موسلي وأدكوك، الدبلوماسية في اليونان القديمة، تعريب: عبد الإله الملاح، المنظمة العربية للتعريب، بيروت، 2010م، ص 274.

(27) جون بوككر، فيليب الثاني والحرب المقدسة، تعريب: محمد عبد الكريم، دار الشؤون الثقافية العامة، بغداد، 2011م، ص 233.

(28) Frank William Walbank, *The Hellenistic World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p100.

(29) Hammond, N. G. L., *The Kingdom of Macedon and the Greek States in the Fourth Century B.C.*, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 1989, p. 23.

(30) محمد السيد جاد، مقدونيا واليونان: دراسة في التحول السياسي والدبلوماسي في القرن الرابع قبل الميلاد، دار الوفاء للطباعة والنشر، الإسكندرية، 2014م، ص 233.