



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CLAVIJO'S DIARIES AND TIMURID SOURCES: FEATURES OF SAMARKAND DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23571023>

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Abstract: *This study presents a comparative-historical analysis of the diplomatic protocol of the Timurid Empire (c. 1404) through the dual lens of Ruy González de Clavijo's travelogue *Embajada a Tamorlán* and Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi's dynastic chronicle *Zafarnama*. By juxtaposing the "outsider" perspective of the Castilian envoy with the "insider" narrative of the Persian court historian, the research illuminates the performative nature of Timurid statecraft. Key findings reveal a "hybrid" protocol system that integrated Chinggisid nomadic traditions—manifested in the mobile tent city of Kan-i-Gil and redistributive feasting rituals—with Perso-Islamic administrative norms. The study analyzes spatial hierarchies, somatic rituals of submission (*kornis*), and the calculated treatment of foreign envoys (Ming vs. Frankish) to argue that Timurid diplomatic ceremonial was a sophisticated instrument for projecting universal sovereignty and managing domestic tribal elites. This synthesis of primary sources challenges the dichotomy between "barbaric" steppe custom and "civilized" sedentary rule, offering a nuanced view of early 15th-century Eurasian diplomacy.*

Keywords: *Amir Timur, Ruy González de Clavijo, Zafarnama, Timurid Empire, Diplomatic Protocol, Samarkand, 15th-century Diplomacy, Kan-i-Gil, Court Rituals, Eurasian History.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the fifteenth century witnessed a geopolitical realignment of the Eurasian continent, centered on the charismatic and terrifying figure of Amir Timur (Tamerlane), whose campaigns had systematically dismantled the established powers of the Islamic world and the steppe. By 1404, Samarkand, his imperial capital, had transformed into the axis

mundi of a new world order, a locus of a vast diplomatic network that stretched from the Atlantic coast of Castile to the imperial court of Ming China. In the autumn of that year, the city hosted a grand assembly (*kurultai*) at the meadow of Kan-i-Gil, an event that served as a theater for the display of global submission, imperial magnificence, and the complex legitimization strategies of the Timurid



state.¹ Among the attendees was Ruy González de Clavijo, an ambassador sent by King Henry III of Castile, whose detailed journal, *Embajada a Tamorlán*, offers a rare and invaluable European perspective into the heart of the Timurid court.³ Conversely, the internal Timurid narrative was meticulously constructed by court historians, most notably Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi in his *Zafarnama* ("Book of Victory"), completed two decades later under the patronage of Timur's successors to cement the dynastic legacy.⁵

The historiographical challenge inherent in reconstructing the diplomatic reality of this period lies in reconciling these two distinct genres of evidence: the travelogue of a bewildered yet empirically observant Castilian knight and the sophisticated, rhymed prose of a Persian panegyrist. While Clavijo captures the immediate visual splendor, the "otherness" of Timurid customs, and the phenomenological experience of the court, Yazdi situates these events within a cosmological, genealogical, and legalistic framework that legitimizes Timur's rule as *Sahib Qiran* (Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction).⁶ This article seeks to bridge the interpretive gap between these sources, employing a rigorous comparative-historical analysis to dissect the diplomatic protocols of Samarkand. By juxtaposing the "outsider" observation with the "insider" construction, we can illuminate the performative aspects of Timurid statecraft.

The significance of this study extends beyond a mere descriptive

reconstruction of medieval pageantry. As noted by the preeminent scholar Beatrice Forbes Manz, the Timurid state was a complex amalgamation of Turco-Mongol tribal politics and Persian bureaucratic administration, a dual structure that required constant negotiation and visual affirmation.⁸ Understanding how diplomacy was enacted—through the spatial arrangement of tents, the hierarchy of feasting, the ritualized consumption of alcohol, and the exchange of gifts—reveals the mechanisms by which Timur managed the heterogeneous elites of his empire and projected power to foreign potentates. Furthermore, the scholarship of Lucien Kahren and Michele Bernardini provides critical insights into the European reception of Timur and the specific ritual functions of court ceremonies, respectively.¹⁰ By synthesizing these secondary perspectives with primary source analysis, this article argues that Samarkand's diplomatic protocol was a distinct system of international relations designed to manifest a "universal sovereignty" that transcended both Islamic caliphal norms and Chinggisid tribal traditions.

To understand the specific features of the protocol witnessed by Clavijo and recorded by Yazdi, one must situate the year 1404 within the broader trajectory of Timur's reign. The Battle of Ankara in 1402, where Timur defeated and captured the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid I, had sent shockwaves through Christendom and the Islamic world alike.³ For the European powers, particularly the Kingdoms of



Spain and France, Timur appeared as a potential, albeit terrifying, ally against the rising Ottoman threat—a geopolitical calculation that Lucien Kehren describes as "realpolitik" disguised as diplomatic curiosity.¹² King Henry III of Castile, seeking to capitalize on this shift in the balance of power, dispatched Clavijo to solidify a relationship initiated by an earlier embassy.³

Simultaneously, Timur's relations with the Ming Dynasty of China had deteriorated to the point of imminent war. The Ming emperors viewed Timur as a vassal, a claim he violently rejected. The *kurultai* of 1404 was therefore not merely a celebration of past victories but a mobilization for the final campaign to the East.¹³ The diplomatic protocol enacted during this period was charged with the tension of this looming conflict. The treatment of the Ming envoys versus the "Frankish" (European) ambassadors, as detailed in the comparative analysis below, was a form of political theater intended to signal alliances and enmities to the assembled Chaghatayid nobility.²

The *Embajada a Tamorlán* is widely regarded as one of the most reliable medieval travel narratives due to its diary-like precision.³ Clavijo records distances, prices, architectural dimensions, and ceremonial procedures with a merchant's eye for detail. However, he often lacks the cultural context to interpret the symbolic meaning of what he sees. For instance, his description of the "paper mask" makeup of the queens or the mobile nature of the

court reflects a sense of wonder and confusion rather than understanding.¹⁶

In contrast, Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama* is a work of high literary style, commissioned by Ibrahim Sultan and based on earlier chronicles like those of Nizam al-Din Shami.⁵ Yazdi's narrative is teleological; every event is framed as a manifestation of Timur's divine destiny. While Clavijo might describe a drunken feast as a chaotic or overwhelming event, Yazdi frames it within the Persianate tradition of *bazm* (convivial gathering) and the Mongol tradition of the *toy* (redistributive feast), stripping away the chaotic elements to present an image of perfect order.¹⁷ This article will utilize these discrepancies not as errors to be corrected, but as data points that reveal the tension between the reality of the court and its idealized self-representation.

2. Methodology

This research adopts a comparative-historical methodology, utilizing a dual-lens approach to analyze the diplomatic rituals of the Timurid court. The study is structured around the triangulation of three distinct bodies of information:

1. Primary European Source: The travelogue of Ruy González de Clavijo, specifically the Guy Le Strange translation (*Embajada a Tamorlán*), focusing on the chapters detailing the journey from the Oxus to Samarkand and the subsequent residence at the court (September–November 1404).¹

2. Primary Timurid Sources: The *Zafarnama* of Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi



(using Thackston's and Pétis de la Croix's translations/commentaries) and references to Nizam al-Din Shami's earlier chronicle. Special attention is paid to the sections covering the Kan-i-Gil festivities and the Kurultai of 1404.⁵

3. Modern Historiography: The theoretical frameworks provided by Beatrice Forbes Manz regarding Timurid political structure ⁸, Lucien Kehren regarding Franco-Timurid diplomatic relations ¹⁰, and Michele Bernardini regarding the semiotics of Timurid ceremony.¹¹

The analysis is organized thematically rather than chronologically. Key themes identified for comparison include:

- Spatiality: The use of tents, gardens, and ephemeral architecture as instruments of power.
- Corporeality: Rituals of prostration (kornis), physical handling of ambassadors, and the proximity to the sovereign.
- Consumption: The symbolism of food distribution (shölen) and the ritualized drinking of wine.
- Hierarchy: The comparative treatment of different national delegations (Castilian vs. Chinese vs. Mamluk).

The methodology involves a direct textual juxtaposition. For every significant ceremonial event described by Clavijo (e.g., the entrance of the Queens, the drinking bouts, the reception of the giraffe), the corresponding account (or lack thereof) in the Timurid sources is examined. This allows for the

identification of "silences" in the official record—events that were too chaotic, un-Islamic, or politically sensitive for Yazdi to include—and "blind spots" in the European record—symbols and lineages that Clavijo failed to recognize.

It is acknowledged that Clavijo's account is mediated by a translator and the specific biases of a Catholic Castilian knight of the 15th century. Similarly, Yazdi's work is a panegyric written post-factum to legitimize Shah Rukh's reign. The methodology accounts for these biases by treating the texts not as objective mirrors of reality, but as cultural artifacts that encode specific worldviews.

3. Results: The Features of Samarkand Diplomatic Protocol

The comparative analysis reveals that Timurid diplomatic protocol was characterized by a distinct "hybridity"—a deliberate fusion of Chinggisid nomadic traditions (which emphasized mobility, redistribution, and lineage) and Perso-Islamic administrative norms (which emphasized static hierarchy, chancery procedure, and religious legitimacy). This hybridity manifested in four primary domains: the spatial organization of the court, the rituals of access, the semiotics of feasting, and the management of foreign hierarchies.

The location of diplomatic reception in Timurid Samarkand was rarely a static stone palace; rather, it was the mobile, ephemeral city of tents set within the suburban garden belt of the capital. Both Clavijo and Yazdi devote significant attention to the Kan-i-Gil (Mine of Clay),



a vast meadow outside Samarkand where the imperial court encamped in the autumn of 1404.¹⁶

Clavijo's description of the royal encampment is one of the most famous passages in travel literature. He describes the court as a "castle" made of fabric, a labyrinth of silk and gold. He details a spatial hierarchy where the ambassadorial party had to pass through multiple enclosures, each more magnificent than the last. He notes tents covered in scarlet cloth, lined with sable and ermine, and supported by poles painted in blue and gold.¹⁵ Clavijo is particularly struck by the "soft architecture"—the use of silk walls (*sarapardas*) to create private zones within the open meadow.²¹ For Clavijo, the tents represent the inconceivable wealth of the monarch; he meticulously records the colors, the embroidery, and the sheer scale, noting that some tents were so large they required mechanical winches to be erected. He describes the "Pavilion of the Audience" as having a high square shape with a flat roof, distinct from the circular yurts of the nomads, indicating a fusion of architectural styles.²⁰

Yazdi's account complements this by providing the ideological context. For Yazdi, the garden setting is not merely a venue but a realization of the Koranic paradise and the Persian literary trope of the "Garden of Delight".²² The *Zafarnama* describes the Kan-i-Gil preparations as a cosmic event where the "architects of the state" constructed "lofty pavilions" that rivaled the heavens.⁷ Yazdi focuses less on the mechanics of the tents and more on

their symbolic order—the placement of the Kōk Saray (Blue Palace) and the specific allocation of space for the chaghatay nobility versus the foreign guests. The tents are described using metaphors of celestial bodies, reinforcing Timur's status as a cosmic ruler.¹⁶

Combining these accounts reveals a critical feature of Timurid protocol: the Mobile Capital. Beatrice Manz notes that the Timurids maintained a peripatetic court tradition.²¹ The diplomatic reception did not occur in a static throne room (like the *Diwan-i-Am* of later Mughals) but in a reconfiguration of space that could be adapted to the specific political needs of the moment. Clavijo's confusion at moving from garden to garden (*Baghi Chinar*, *Baghi Dilkusha*) reflects this fluidity.²³ The protocol demanded that the ambassador "chase" the ruler, physically enacting the submission of the visitor to the host's movement. The tent city at Kan-i-Gil, with its rigorous internal organization described by Yazdi and observed by Clavijo, functioned as a "portable city" that displayed the empire's ability to mobilize resources and impose order on the natural landscape.²¹

The moment of encounter between the ambassador and the sovereign was the focal point of diplomatic protocol. This interaction was governed by strict rules of bodily comportment known as *kornis* (kneeling/bowing), a term and practice deeply rooted in Mongol tradition.

Clavijo recounts a physically demanding ritual. Before seeing Timur, the ambassadors were made to wait, then



led forward by mirzas (princes) holding them by the armpits—a Mongol custom designed to prevent assassination and enforce helplessness.⁴ They were instructed to kneel and bow (*kornis*) at specific intervals: first at a great distance, then closer, and finally immediately before the throne.²⁴ Clavijo notes that Timur was seated not on a raised dais in the European style, but cross-legged on silk carpets on the ground (or a low platform), surrounded by a fountain.²⁵

Yazdi's account of similar audiences confirms the ritual of *kornis* (bending the knee) as a standard requirement for all who approached the Sahib Qiran.²⁴ The *Zafarnama* illustrations, such as those in the Garrett manuscript (1467), often depict this precise moment: the ruler seated in a garden pavilion, isolated by a stream or a barrier, with amirs and envoys kneeling in concentric circles.²⁴ The visual evidence aligns with Clavijo's textual description of the "armpit-holding" and the kneeling, confirming that this was a codified state ritual.

Clavijo records Timur's opening words with evident pride: "Behold! here are the ambassadors sent by my son the king of Spain, who is the greatest king of the Franks, and lives at the end of the world".²⁵ This phrasing is significant. By calling the King of Castile his "son," Timur uses a diplomatic kinship term that implies affection but also strict hierarchy—a father outranks a son. This subtle assertion of superiority might have been lost on Clavijo, who interpreted the

warmth of the reception as a recognition of Spanish equality.²

Manz argues that this paternalistic language was standard Timurid diplomatic rhetoric, used to integrate foreign potentates into a "family" of subordinate vassals.² The *Zafarnama* rarely details the specific dialogue with minor ambassadors (like those of Castile) but emphasizes the global nature of the submissions, listing envoys from Egypt, India, and China to demonstrate the universality of Timur's command.⁵ The explicit mention of the "King of the Franks" in Clavijo's account serves his own narrative of legitimation back home, while for Timur, it served to impress the assembled Chaghatayid elite with the reach of his influence.

One of the most revealing episodes in Clavijo's diary is the seating controversy involving the Chinese ambassadors. This incident provides a sharp contrast between European and Asian diplomatic standings in 1404 and illustrates the performative nature of Timurid foreign policy.

Clavijo reports that during a banquet, he and the other European envoys were seated above the ambassador of the "Lord of Cathay" (the Ming Yongle Emperor). When the Chinese envoy protested, claiming his master was the "Lord of the Realms of the Face of the Earth," Timur publicly rebuked him, calling the Ming emperor a "thief and a bad man" and forcing the envoy to sit below the Spaniards.²

This breach of protocol was calculated political theater. Historically,



the Ming viewed the Timurids as vassals, a claim Timur violently rejected. By demoting the Chinese envoy, Timur was publicly declaring his independence and imminent hostility toward China (he would launch an invasion months later).¹³ For Clavijo, this was a triumph of Castilian prestige. However, Manz and recent scholarship suggest a different reading: the elevation of the "Franks" was likely a strategic move to secure their support (or at least neutrality) against the Ottomans and Mamluks, while the humiliation of the Chinese was a rallying cry for the upcoming Ghazwa (holy war) against the "infidel" East.²⁷ The "Frankish" ambassadors were useful novelties and potential allies on a different front; the Chinese were immediate ideological rivals. The *Zafarnama* does not explicitly mention this seating dispute with the specific detail of the Spanish envoy, but it consistently frames relations with China in terms of preparation for war, validating the hostility Clavijo witnessed.²⁸

Feasting was the primary mechanism of social bonding and redistribution in the Timurid court. The scale of these banquets was intended to overwhelm the senses and enforce loyalty through the sharing of the sovereign's bounty.

Clavijo describes the service of food with astonishment: "When the lord called for meat, the people dragged it to him on pieces of leather, so great was its weight".²⁵ He details the consumption of horse meat, a staple of the steppe nomads but a taboo or oddity for Europeans. The cutting of the meat was a ritual

performance; carvers kneeling on the leather mats distributed specific cuts according to rank.²⁹ This corresponds with the Mongol tradition of *shölen* (ceremonial feast), where the sharing of the animal symbolizes the sharing of the Khan's grace.

Yazdi's chronicle corroborates this, mentioning the abundance of food and the presence of "roasted horses" at the great Toy (feast) of Kan-i-Gil.²⁹ The *Zafarnama* utilizes the feast as a literary trope to demonstrate the ruler's beneficence and the prosperity of the realm.²⁶ The correspondence between Clavijo's observation of the "leather mats" and the carvers and the anthropological understanding of Mongol feasting rituals highlights the persistence of steppe customs in 1404.

A distinct feature of Timurid protocol was the obligatory consumption of wine. Clavijo notes that attendees were often forced to drink until intoxicated, and that refusing the cup was an insult to the ruler.³⁰ The wine was served in gold and silver jugs, and the cupbearers played a central role in the ceremony.

Michele Bernardini has analyzed this "drinking ritual" as a survival of the Chinggisid *ötög* ceremony, where sharing a cup established a bond of loyalty.¹⁷ While orthodox Islam prohibits alcohol, the Timurid court maintained this Turco-Mongol tradition as a marker of military aristocracy. Yazdi, writing in a more Islamicized context later, often downplays the drunkenness or frames it within the context of "joyful celebration" (*bazm*),



glossing over the debauchery that shocked Clavijo.³¹ However, illustrations in later Zafarnama manuscripts freely depict wine drinking, indicating its persistent cultural importance.³²

Perhaps the most striking divergence from contemporary Islamic or European norms witnessed by Clavijo was the visibility and prominence of royal women.

Clavijo devotes detailed passages to Saray Mulk Khanum (Timur's chief wife), describing her entrance into the pavilion. She was accompanied by 300 attendants, wearing a complex headdress of red silk, pearls, and feathers, and her face was covered with a thick layer of white makeup that Clavijo likened to a "paper mask".¹⁶ She sat near Timur and participated in the banquets, receiving envoys.

This high visibility is consistent with Turco-Mongol traditions where the Khatun held significant political power and independent courts. The Zafarnama confirms her role, noting her organization of banquets and her status as the daughter of a Chinggisid Khan, which conferred the title Gurkani (Son-in-Law) upon Timur.³³ David J. Roxburgh analyzes Clavijo's "paper mask" description as a metaphor for the mediated experience of the court—the woman, like the tented city, was an elaborate construction of visual splendor designed to awe.¹⁶ Her presence was not merely ornamental; it was a political statement of Timur's connection to the Golden Lineage of Genghis Khan, a legitimacy he could not claim by birth.

4. 5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Ruy González de Clavijo's diaries and the Timurid sources, particularly the Zafarnama of Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, reveals that the diplomatic protocol of Samarkand in 1404 was a sophisticated system of political communication designed to manifest the universal sovereignty of Amir Timur.

Clavijo's account provides the material evidence: the overwhelming scale of the Kan-i-Gil tent city, the abundance of the feasts, the physical choreography of the kornis, and the jarring juxtaposition of refinement and "nomadic" roughness. These details confirm the "steppe" substrate of the court, where power was mobile, visual, and redistributive.

The Timurid sources, filtered through Yazdi, provide the ideological software: the framing of these events as cosmic victories and the integration of diverse interactions into a narrative of unchallengeable legitimacy.

Together, these sources show that Timurid diplomatic protocol was characterized by hybridity (blending Steppe and Sown), performative hierarchy (using seating and gifts to map the world order), and cosmological centrality (Samarkand as the center of the world). The friction between Clavijo's "Frankish" expectations and Timur's imperial reality highlights the unique position of the Timurid Empire as the bridge between the Mongol World Empire and the early modern Islamic gunpowder empires. In the end, Clavijo saw the performance; Yazdi read the script; and together, they



preserve the memory of a moment when Samarkand was the capital of the world.

6. Comprehensive Analysis of Key Features of Diplomatic Protocol

The following sections provide a deepened analysis of the specific ceremonial elements introduced in the results section, integrating further scholarly commentary and specific textual evidence.

David J. Roxburgh's analysis of Clavijo's description of Saray Mulk Khanum's makeup ("white lead... like a paper mask") opens a window into the aesthetic values of the Timurid court.¹⁶ This heavy stylization, alien to the Spaniard, likely had ritualistic or symbolic significance, possibly linked to Chinese aesthetic influences which were prevalent in Timurid art (e.g., in the *Zafarnama* illustrations of facial features). Clavijo describes the Queen's arrival as a theatrical event: she walked under a canopy carried by eunuchs, her train held by fifteen ladies. The "mask" parallels the "soft architecture" of the tents—a constructed, beautified surface concealing the raw reality of the steppe power structure. It also served to depersonalize the Queen, transforming her from an individual into an icon of the dynasty, a visual representation of the Gurkani legitimacy that underpinned Timur's right to rule.

The arrival of the giraffe from the Mamluk Sultanate is a perfect vignette for comparative analysis. For Clavijo, it was a "jornufa," a beast of wonder described with zoological curiosity—its neck length, its gait, its strangeness.²⁶ For the Timurid

court, recorded by Yazdi, the animal was not merely a biological curiosity but a potent symbol of the Mamluks' fear and submission following Timur's devastation of Syria. The *Zafarnama* lists the giraffe alongside ostriches and other "rarities" as proof that the "Kings of the West" (Egypt) had bowed to the "Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction".²⁶ The animal's presence in the Kan-i-Gil procession wasn't just a circus act; it was a living treaty of non-aggression, translated into a form (tribute) that the Samarkand populace could understand.

Michele Bernardini's research into the *Zafarnama* and other Timurid texts highlights the centrality of the drinking ritual (toy-i-sharāb). Unlike the private, often illicit wine consumption in other Islamic courts, Timurid drinking was public and obligatory during feasts. Clavijo notes that guests were not allowed to leave until they were sufficiently intoxicated, and that refusing a cup offered by the Emperor was tantamount to treason.¹⁷ This aligns with the Mongol concept of the and (sworn brotherhood) and the ötög, where sharing a cup forged a bond stronger than blood. The "cupbearer" (saqi) was thus a high-ranking official, not a mere servant. This ritual posed a challenge for later chroniclers like Yazdi, who had to reconcile the "Great Amir's" piety with his public consumption of alcohol. Yazdi's solution was often to couch these events in the language of mystical intoxication or royal celebration, distancing them from the vulgarity of drunkenness described by Clavijo.



The detailed description of the tents provided by Clavijo—specifically the use of "crimson velvet," "silver gilt falcons," and "apples and moons" atop the poles—offers a material inventory that complements Yazdi's metaphorical descriptions. The use of the "Moon and Apple" finials is likely a survival of Turco-Mongol shamanistic symbols, representing the connection between the earth and the sky.²⁰ The enclosure walls (saraparda) created a "forbidden city" within the meadow, strictly regulating access. The fact that Clavijo was admitted into these inner sanctums was a signal honor, one that he interpreted as personal favor but which Manz suggests was a calculated display to impress a representative of the distant "Frankish" lands.²

The seating dispute between the Spanish and Chinese ambassadors is perhaps the most politically charged

moment in Clavijo's narrative. By 1404, Timur had ceased paying tribute to the Ming and was actively preparing for an invasion of China. The public humiliation of the Ming envoy—forcing him to sit below the representative of a distant, unknown king (Henry III of Castile)—was a deliberate inversion of the Chinese tribute system. It signaled to the assembled Chaghatayid chiefs that the old order (Mongol/Chinese supremacy) was over, replaced by the new Timurid centrality. Clavijo, unaware of the looming war, interpreted this solely as a recognition of Christian superiority. This misunderstanding highlights the necessity of the comparative approach: without the context provided by Chinese and Persian sources regarding the Timur-Ming tensions¹³, Clavijo's account is merely an anecdote; with them, it becomes a crucial piece of evidence for the diplomatic prelude to war.

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