

## THE BYZANTINE-AVAR COOPERATION AGAINST THE SLAVS (578)

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The domination of the Avars in the Carpathian basin in 568 constituted a permanent threat for the Byzantine empire to its northern frontiers, which was terminated after the unsuccessful siege of Constantinople by the Avars and the Persians in 626. During this period of almost 60 years, Byzantium accepted disastrous raids, conducted many wars and incurred several treaties with the Avars, which anticipated the payment of a heavy yearly tribute to the avar khaganate.<sup>2</sup>

Besides the avar attacks, the Slavic tribes of the lower Danube, independent or under avar rule, also conducted raids into the Byzantine empire since the reign of Justinian I (527-565). Even though they often devastated the Byzantine provinces, the Byzantine army managed to repel the raiders either through military operations against them, or through the construction of an extensive system of fortifications which was built in the Balkans by Justinian I.<sup>3</sup>

The confrontation of Avars and Slavs in the Balkans became very difficult for the Byzantines after the beginning of the Persian war in 572 and the transfer of the greater part of the Byzantine army to the East. In 574 the Byzantines were defeated for first time by the Avars and procured a peace treaty with them, which anticipated the yearly payment of 80 000 gold coins (*solidi*) to the Avars.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the Slav raids were intense during the joint rule of Justin II with Tiberius (565-578) and the sole reign of Tiberius (578-582). According to Menander the Guardsman, in the fourth year of the joint rule of Tiberius (578), 100 000 Slavs plundered Thrace and many other areas.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, John of Biclarum reports in his *Chronicle* avar and slav attacks in Thrace as far as the walls of Constantinople.<sup>6</sup> This information is interpreted as confusion of the Avars with the Slavs, either because Menander refers to good relations between Tiberius and the Avars<sup>7</sup> or because the *Chronicle* mentions naval attacks, which could be attributed only to the Slavs.<sup>8</sup>

The activity of the slav tribes of the lower Danube was backed neither by Tiberius nor Bajan, the khagan of the Avars. Since the Slavs had devastated Greece and Tiberius had almost no army in the Balkans, he sent an embassy to Bajan, who had a friendly attitude towards the empire after the accession of Tiberius to the throne. Tiberius succeeded in securing the support of the khagan for military cooperation against the Slav raiders.<sup>9</sup> This military cooperation between the Byzantines and the Avars took place in 578<sup>10</sup> and is the only one which is attested during the history of the Byzantine-avar relations.

The Avars attacked the Slavs not only because Tiberius asked for their help, but they considered the Slavs as their own enemies for another reason. Bajan had sent earlier envoys to the Slavs of the

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<sup>2</sup> *Avenarius* 1974, 67-116; *Pohl* 1988, 58-162, 237-255.

<sup>3</sup> *Velkov* 1987, 152-161; *Comşa* 1974, 62; *Curta* 2001, 74-89; *Madgearu* 1996, 35, 36.

<sup>4</sup> *Menandros Protector, Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 15.5, p. 151. The information on the amount of the yearly tribute derives from a later avar embassy to Constantinople under Targitius in 579, see *Menandros Protector, Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 25.1, p. 217; *Avenarius* 1974, 87; *Pohl* 1988, 65.

<sup>5</sup> *Menandros Protector, Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 20.2, p. 191, 280, n. 257; *Madgearu* 1996, 37; *Avenarius*, 1974, 88; *Zástěrová* 1994, 79; *Curta* 2001, 91; *Waldmüller* 1976, 106.

<sup>6</sup> *Iohannes Biclarensis Abbas, Chronica*, p. 214, 576? (Anno X Iustini imp.) 5: "Sclavini in Thracia multas urbes Romanorum pervadunt, quas depopulatas vacuas reliquere. Avars litora maris captiose obsident et navibus litora Thraciae navigantibus satis infesti sunt", p. 215, 577? (Anno ergo I Imperii Tiberii) 1: "Avars Thracias vastant et regiam urbem a muro longo obsident"; *Kollautz* 1968, 135; *Madgearu* 1996, 36, 37; *Avenarius* 1974, 89, 90; *Curta* 2001, 91. For the identification of the testimony of Menander with these of Iohannes Biclarensis see *Pohl* 1988, 357, ch. 3.3, n. 10; *Waldmüller* 1976, 106.

<sup>7</sup> *Menandros Protector, Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 21, p. 193: "At the time he was not hostile towards the Romans, and, indeed, from the very beginning of Tiberius' reign had wished to be friendly with our state". *Pohl* 1988, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Madgearu* 1996, σελ. 37; *Curta* 2001, 91.

<sup>9</sup> *Menandros Protector, Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 21, p. 193, p. 280, n. 260; *Waldmüller* 1976, 107; *Madgearu* 1996, 37, 38; *Avenarius* 1974, 88; *Pohl* 1988, 68.

<sup>10</sup> *Curta* 2001, 92 (late summer or early fall of 578); *Fritze* 1982, 62 (in 576); *Comşa* 1974, 72 (in 579). On the dating of the expedition see also *Pohl* 1988, 357, ch. 3.3, n. 16.

chieftain Daurentius (or Dauritas), asking from them to accept the Avar suzerainty and to pay him tribute. The refusal of the Slav chieftain provoked a struggle which had as a result the murder of the Avar envoys by the Slavs.<sup>11</sup> This act gave Bajan a good pretext to attack the Slavs and to accept the proposal for an alliance by Tiberius. Moreover, he had the conviction that in the land of these tribes he could obtain a lot of booty, since the Byzantine provinces had long been plundered by the Slavs, whose own land had never been raided by any other people at all.<sup>12</sup>

The Avars undertook the main part of the expedition against the Slavs in cooperation with the *quaestor exercitus* Iohannes, who was at the same time *magister militum* (or *praefectus praetorio*) *per Illyricum* and apparently commanded the Danube fleet. Tiberius ordered him to transport Bajan and 60 000 Avar horsemen (a rather exaggerated figure) by ship along the Danube, from Pannonia to Scythia Minor (modern Dovroutsa/Dobrodgea).<sup>13</sup> When the Avars crossed the Danube, they were already in the area of Daurentius' tribes, possibly in eastern Walachia or southern Moldavia. The Avars set fire to the Slavic villages and laid waste the fields. On the other hand, the Slavs didn't risk any conflict with Bajan, but they took refuge into the nearby woods.<sup>14</sup> As it appears from the claims of the Avar envoys one year later (579) in Constantinople, we could attribute to this expedition the liberation of many Byzantines who were captives in the Slav land.<sup>15</sup>

Related to this short cooperation between the Byzantines and the Avars in 578 is the testimony of Theophanes on the 15 000 *ethnikoi*<sup>16</sup> (Zonaras mentions 12 000) who were sent by Tiberius to the Persian frontier to reinforce the army of the general, and later emperor, Maurice.<sup>17</sup> According to the old view of E. Stein, they were Avar troops in exchange of Byzantine help against the Slavs.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, W. Pohl assumes that they were some non-Avar light armored troops, subordinate to the khagan.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, both views seem to be ambiguous, since Theophanes doesn't mention provision of troops to Tiberius but "*having bought contingents of aliens*" (Zonaras refers *athroisais* = collected, concentrated). In the interpretation of this passage, we should take into account the testimony of Euagrius, that Tiberius recruited a huge number of mercenaries for the needs of the Persian war. Even if the number stated of 150 000 soldiers seems to be exaggerated, this army was formed by mercenaries "*from the Alps, the Rhine, Pannonia, Moesia, Slavs, Scythians, Illyrians and Isaurians*".<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the event is dated by Theophanes in 581/582, in the fourth year of the reign of Tiberius, and could not concern any kind of cooperation between Byzantium and the Avars, since it would have coincided with the Avar siege of Sirmium (579-582).

Despite the width and the good organization of the operation against the Slavs, the expedition itself did not achieve the expected results both for the khagan Bajan and Tiberius. That the situation in the northern Balkans remained confused is shown by the fact that, in 579, the Avar envoy and his small Roman escort, were ambushed and murdered by Slav marauders on their way back from Constantinople through Illyricum.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, through this embassy, the Avar khagan feigned that the purpose for the construction of a bridge over the river Save made plain his desire to continue the operations against the Slavs, the "*common enemy*" of the Byzantines and the Avars, and he asked

<sup>11</sup> Menandros Protector, *Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 21, p. 195; Curta 2001, 91; Avenarius 1974, 87, 88. Waldmüller 1976, 108; Pohl 1988, 68; Zástěrová 1994, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Menandros Protector, *Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 21, p. 195; Waldmüller 1976, 108; Curta 2001, 91; Pohl 1988, 69.

<sup>13</sup> Menandros Protector, *Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 21, p. 193; pp. 280-281, n. 261, 262; Waldmüller 1976, 107; Curta 2001, 92; Avenarius 1974, 88, 89; Pohl 1988, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Menandros Protector, *Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 21, σελ. 193-195; Zástěrová 1994, 79; Avenarius 1974, 88, 89; Curta 2001, 92; Čilinská 1984, 50; Waldmüller 1976, 107, 108; Pohl 1988, 69.

<sup>15</sup> Menandros Protector, *Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 25.1, p. 219: "He pointed out that he has done this earlier to please the Roman Emperor and had freed and returned to the Romans many tens of thousands of captives from Roman territory who were in slavery among the Slavs". Waldmüller 1976, 108; Avenarius 1974, 89.

<sup>16</sup> On the meaning of *ethnikos*: a) pagan, infidel (non Christian) b) national, foreign. See Stephanus 1954, 182; Liddell/Scott 1968, 480.

<sup>17</sup> Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 251, 24-28, p. 373 (AM 6074, AD 581/2. Tiberius, 4<sup>th</sup> year): "The emperor Tiberius, having bought contingents of aliens, formed them into an army bearing his own name, 15 000 men whom he clothed and armed. He appointed as their general Maurice, the *comes foederatorum*, with Narses as his second-in-command. Then he sent them against the Persians."; Ioannis Zonaras, *Epitomae Historiarum*, 181, 182.

<sup>18</sup> Stein 1919, 71, 72, 85, 86, n. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Pohl 1988, 69, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Euagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V 14, pp. 209, 210; Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, p. 374, n. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Menandros Protector, *Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 25. 2, p. 225: "He departed the capital with many gifts for what he promised to do. But it happened that while he was crossing Illyricum with his small Roman escort he was killed by Slavs who were raiding the area"; Curta 2001, 92, 96; Kollautz 1980, 477. Pohl 1988, 72, 178; Waldmüller 1976, 115.

the help of the Byzantine emperor for this purpose.<sup>22</sup> But the real intentions of the khagan were more far-fetched from just such an operation. The military cooperation with Tiberius remained an isolated event in Byzantine-avar relations, since Bajan turned again his interest to the occupation of Sirmium, the strongest point of the Byzantine defense system on the Balkans.

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<sup>22</sup> *Menandros Protector, Historia Fragmenta*, fr. 25. 2, p. 223: "The envoys of the Avars reached the capital and asked the Emperor to make ready the ships for the Khagan and the avar army which would cross the Danube to attack the Slavs. They said that the Khagan, enthused with friendship towards him, was building a bridge on the river Save and wished to destroy the Slavs, the common enemies of himself and the Romans". *Waldmüller 1976*, 113, 114; *Pohl 1988*, 72.