

## The Avars: foederati of Byzantium?

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The first contact between the Byzantine empire with the Avars is dated in January of 558, when the Avars sent from the area north of the Caucasus their first embassy to Justinian I. The head of the avar embassy Kandich asked from Justinian, in exchange for an alliance, valuable gifts, yearly payments and land for settlement, promising that the Avars would fight against the enemies of the empire. Justinian accepted the suggestion of alliance but he sent only such gifts to the avar khagan as „cords worked with gold, couches, silk garments and a great many other objects, which would mollify the arrogant spirits of the Avars“.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Justinian sent to the Avars the *spatharius* Valentinus with the purpose of turning them against the tribes living north of the Caucasus and the Black Sea. During the victorious march of the Avars from 558 to 562 through the southern Russian steppes, *Menander Protector* mentions the Bulgar tribe of the Onogurs, the Hunic tribes of Zaloi and Savirs and also the Antae who were defeated by the Avars.<sup>2</sup> The starting point of the avar march was the river Dniepr.<sup>3</sup> The rapprochement of the Avars from Justinian related to the protection of the northern frontiers of the empire, since slav and Bulgar tribes operated intensive raids into the Byzantine Balkan provinces.

The bestowal of gifts to the Avars, which started in 558 with the alliance between Justinian and Bajan, is interpreted by some scholars as recruitment of the Avars to the service of Byzantium under

<sup>1</sup> *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, ed. R. C. Blockley, Liverpool 1985, fr. 5. 1-2, pp. 49-51. Theophanes, *Chronography*, ed. C. de Boor, Leipzig 1883, p. 232, 11-13. Euagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. J. Bidez-L. Parmentier, Amsterdam 1964, E 1, p. 196, 12-18. L. Hauptmann, Les rapports des Byzantins avec les Slaves et les Avars pendant la seconde moitié du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle, *Byzantion* 4 (1927-1928), p. 148. P. Goubert, Les Avars d'après les sources grecques du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle. *Akten des vierundzwanzigsten Internationalen Orientalisten-Kongresses, Munich 28. August bis 4. September 1957*, ed. H. Franke (Wiesbaden 1959), p. 214. A. Kollautz -H. Miyakawa, *Geschichte und Kultur eines völkerwanderungszeitlichen Nomadenvolkes. Die Jou-Jan der Mongolei und die Awaren in Mitteleuropa*, vol. I (*Die Geschichte*), Klagenfurt 1970, p. 155. A. Avenarius, *Die Awaren in Europa*, Amsterdam 1974, p. 44. A. Kollautz, Völkerbewegungen an der unteren und mittleren Donau im Zeitraum von 558/562 bis 582 (Fall von Sirmium). *Studien zur Völkerwanderungszeit im östlichen Mitteleuropa*, ed. G. Mildnerberger (Marburg 1980), p. 448. W. Pohl, *Die Awaren. Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa, 567-822 n. Chr.*, Munich 1988, pp. 18, 180.

<sup>2</sup> *Menander*, fr. 5. 2, p. 51: „In addition, he sent as ambassador Valentinus, one of the imperial bodyguard, and he urged the tribe to make an alliance with the Romans and take up arms against their enemies...When Valentinus arrived at his destination, presented his gifts and delivered the Emperor's message, the Avars first crushed the Unigurs, then the Zali, a Hunnic tribe, and they also destroyed the Sabirs“. fr. 5. 3, p. 51: „When the leaders of the Antae had failed miserably and had been thwarted in their hopes, the Avars ravaged and plundered their land...Thereafter they ravaged the land of the Antae even more than before, carrying off prisoners and plunder without respite“. Blockley, *Menander*, p. 253, note 22-24. Hauptmann, *Rapports*, pp. 148-149. G. Moravcsik, Zur Geschichte der Onoguren, *Ungarische Jahrbücher* 10/1-2 (1930), p. 63. Kollautz-Miyakawa, *Geschichte und Kultur* I, pp. 157-158. Avenarius, *Europa*, pp. 46-51. Pohl, *Awaren*, pp. 19, 39-40.

<sup>3</sup> *Menander*, fr. 19. 1, p. 175: „But I know very well where the river Danapris flows, and the Danube and the Hebrus, and from where our slaves, the Uarkhonitai, crossed into roman territory.“ *Suidas Lexikon*, ed. A. Adler, vol. II, Leipzig 1931, I 355/2, p. 634. Blockley, *Menander*, p. 276, note 224. Pohl, *Awaren*, pp. 32, 39.

the status of federates (*foederati*).<sup>4</sup> The Avars are referred to the sources as *foederati* only by John of Ephesus, who obviously attributes the character of *foedus* to the alliance of 558.<sup>5</sup> In order to determine the acceptance of this view, we should examine the conditions pertaining to the status of *foederati* and, at the same time, if such a treaty between Byzantium and the Avars really took place, on the basis of the sources' information on their negotiations from 558 until 574.

According to the older treaties (*foedus*) of Constantine I and Theodosius I with the Goths in 332 and 382 respectively, to the federates were paid regular yearly payments/subsidies (which are referred under the technical terms *syntaxeis*, *sitiseis*, *annonae foederaticae* etc.) and land for settlement. Theodosius I also conceded donations to the Goths (*doreai*), which were rather personal gifts to their rulers. These concessions formed the terms of the treaty which characterized the status of *foederati*. On the other hand, the federates' obligations towards the empire included military tasks and their force constituted part of the imperial army.<sup>6</sup>

The Avars possibly knew the framework of this status, since they posed it as demand at their first embassy to Justinian I in 558.<sup>7</sup> The Byzantine emperor refused the concession of land for settlement and the yearly payments, offering them only gifts.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the Avars turned immediately against some tribes doesn't exclude the possibility of a money's subsidy from Justinian, but we have no report of a regular yearly payment as it was the demand of the avar legate Kandich.

At their second embassy to Justinian I in 562, the Avars asserted land for settlement within the

<sup>4</sup> A. Kollautz, Die Awaren. Die Schichtung in einer Nomadenherrschaft, *Saeculum* 5 (1954), p. 133. Avenarius, *Europa*, pp. 44-45. W. Fritze, Zur Bedeutung der Awaren für die slawische Ausdehnungsbewegung im frühen Mittelalter. *Frühzeit zwischen Ostsee und Donau. Ausgewählte Beiträge zum geschichtlichen Werden im östlichen Mitteleuropa vom 6. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert*, ed. L. Kuchenbuch-W. Schich (*Berliner Historische Studien* 6, 1982), p. 61. O. Mazal, *Justinian I. und seine Zeit*, Köln-Waimar-Vienna 2001, p. 193. Pohl (*Awaren*, pp. 210-212) and Goubert (*Les Avars*, p. 216), although they don't accept the status of federates, they assume that the Avars were receiving from Justinian yearly payments.

<sup>5</sup> John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. E. W. Brooks (CSCO 106, *Scriptores Syri* 55), Louvain 1964, XXIV, p. 246, 20: „de populo foedo qui vocantur Avars“. XLV-XLIX, p. 259, 20-22: „Et stimulus rursus contra Romanos surrexit a populo barbarorum foedorum crines tortos gerentium qui vocantur Avars, qui a finibus orientis migraverant et exierant...“

<sup>6</sup> E. Chrysos, *Βυζαντιον και οι Γοιθοι. Συμβολη εις την εξωτερικην πολιτικην τον Βυζαντιον κατα τον Δ αιωνα* Thessaloniki 1972, pp. 57-68, 151-168. Idem, *Gothia Romana. Zur Rechtslage des Föderatenlandes der Westgoten im 4. Jh., Dacoromania* 1 (1973) pp. 52-64. H. Wolfram, Zur Ansiedlung reichsangehöriger Föderaten. Erklärungsversuche und Forschungsziele, *MIÖG* 91 (1983), pp. 5-35, esp. 27-35. Idem, *Das Reich und die Germanen*, Vienna 1998, pp. 104, 144-145.

<sup>7</sup> Menander, fr. 5. 1, p. 49: „The Emperor should make an alliance with them and enjoy their efficient protection. But they would only be well-disposed to the Roman state in exchange for the most valuable gifts, yearly payments and very fertile land to inhabit“.

<sup>8</sup> Menander, fr. 5. 2, pp. 49-51: „The Emperor put the matter up for discussion, and when the holy senate had praised his plan and its shrewdness, he immediately sent the gifts: cords worked with gold, couches, silk garments and a great many other objects which would mollify the arrogant spirits of the Avars“. Victoris Episcopi Tonnensis, *Chronica*, ed. Th. Mommsen, *MGH, AA* 11/1, Berlin 1894, p. 205, 563. 2: „Eo anno Iustinianus princeps legatos gentis Avarorum primus primos suscepit et cum donis maximis remeare unde venerant facit“, who dates incorrectly the first avar embassy to Constantinople in 563. See Avenarius, *Europa*, p. 44. Pohl, *Awaren*, p. 46.

empire's soil.<sup>9</sup> Since their demand concerned only the concession of land, independently if it was not attributed to them, *Pohl* interpreted it as the logical „second step“ of the chagan, assuming that he had already secured the yearly payments and he had been integrated to the service of the empire.<sup>10</sup> As we saw above, *Menander* doesn't mention any defrayment of yearly payments to the embassy of 558 and also, the three concessions (yearly payments, land and gifts) were attributed simultaneously to the federates and were not the object of a gradual provision. At this embassy too, the only which Justinian conceded was gifts.<sup>11</sup>

On the first embassy to Justin II in 565, the avar envoy Targitius asked the emperor to continue the provision of Justinian's gifts, adding something more to them.<sup>12</sup> In the relative fragment there is no mention of payments but only gifts. On the contrary, the yearly payments (a kind of tribute) was rather the purpose of Targitius' legacy.<sup>13</sup> Justin refused any relationship of alliance with the Avars and he pointed out that, if he were to accept concessions, this would be a reward for an eventual service and not a yearly tribute as they desired.<sup>14</sup> In accordance with *Menander* is the testimony of *Corippus*.<sup>15</sup> From the allegations of Targitius it becomes clear that the Avars had considered as an act of tribute the voluntary yearly gifts of Justinian. By contrast, Justin asked the Avars if they would declare war as long as he didn't conclude a treaty with the payment of tribute (*pacta*) and he used

<sup>9</sup> *Menander*, fr. 5. 4, pp. 51-53 : „Envoys came to Justinian from the Avars to look over the territory where the tribe was to make its home. On the advice of the general Justin, the Emperor was planning to settle the tribe on the land which the Heruls had earlier inhabited, which is called Second Pannonia. If they had agreed, the Emperor would have granted this. But the Avars were unwilling to live outside Scythia, since, I suppose, they were greatly attached to the place“. Blockley, *Menander*, p. 253, note 26-28. Hauptmann, *Rapports*, pp. 148-149. Goubert, *Les Avars*, p. 214. M. Comşa, Einige Betrachtungen über die Ereignisse im 6.-7. Jh. an der unteren Donau, *Slavia antiqua* 21 (1974), p. 71. Kollautz, *Völkerbewegungen*, pp. 448-449. Pohl, *Awaren*, p. 44. Mazal, *Justinian I*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>10</sup> Pohl, *Awaren*, p. 206.

<sup>11</sup> *Menander*, fr. 5. 4, p. 53: „Since the envoys of the Avars could obtain none of their demands from the Emperor, they received their accustomed gifts from him and were allowed to depart, having purchased whatever they required, both clothing and weaponry.“

<sup>12</sup> *Menander*, fr. 8, p. 95: „When your father lavished gifts upon us, we paid him back both by non invading Roman territory, though we are able to do so, and by performing still more... We, therefore, believe that the only innovation which you will make towards us will be to pay us more than your father did, which will bind us to you more closely than to him, since we shall owe you greater thanks. We have come to receive our customary gifts.“ Blockley, *Menander*, p. 261, note 94. Kollautz, *Völkerbewegungen*, pp. 459-461.

<sup>13</sup> *Menander*, fr. 8, p. 95: „The Avar envoys made this ambiguous speech, now pleading, now threatening, because they thought that by this means they would frighten and intimidate the Emperor, and as a result the Romans would be compelled to pay tribute to the Avars“.

<sup>14</sup> *Menander*, fr. 8, p. 95: „I shall never need an alliance with you, nor shall you receive from us anything other than what we wish to give, and that as a free gift for your service, not, as you expect, a tax upon us.“ Pohl, *Awaren*, p. 49, 211. The negative attitude of Justin towards the Avars in 565 is interpreted by Fritze (*Bedeutung*, pp. 62, 83) and Mazal (*Justinian I*, p. 194) as resulting to an interruption of the foedus between the Avars and Justinian I in 558.

<sup>15</sup> Flavius Cresconius Corippus, In *Laudem Iustini Augusti Minoris* lib. IV, ed. A. Cameron, London 1976, III, p. 70, 303-307 (engl. translation, p. 108): „It is time for us to take the yearly solace of your generous father. What that holy man gave us it is fitting for you to give also. If you would rather that our peace treaty remain untested and that our agreements stand, you will send our king the gifts that are his due.“ Cameron, *Corippus*, p. 192, note 303.

the term *dona* (gifts) for the previous concessions of Justinian I to the Avars.<sup>16</sup> It is in the course of this embassy that *Menander* makes a reference to the gifts which Justinian I used to offer to the Avars, without including any payment.<sup>17</sup>

During the negotiations after the siege of Sirmium in 568, the avar envoys asked Bonus for „treaty and peace“ to terminate the Byzantine-avar hostilities.<sup>18</sup> The Avars continued to desire the status of federates with the empire and this is proved in the transactions of the next avar embassy in 568, when the Avars seek once more „treaty“ (*spondai, foedus*) with Byzantium.<sup>19</sup>

Of particular interest for the claims of the Avars appears to be the speech of Targitius during the avar embassy to Justin II in 568, where the avar envoy clearly speaks of „yearly payments“. The Avars, obviously because they didn't obtain it, considered as vested interest the receipt of the tribute which Byzantium used to submit to the Kutrigurs and Utigurs, who were already under the avar rule.<sup>20</sup> Justin for his part claimed that these payments to the Kutrigurs and Utigurs had voluntary character.<sup>21</sup> In any case, they were a kind of tribute, because they were regular. This fact is confirmed by the use of the related technical term by *Menander* at the next embassy of Targitius in 569, when the avar envoy asked retrospectively the yearly *syntaxeis* which the two Bulgar tribes received every year before their subordination to the Avars.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, *Menander* informs us on the avar embassy under Apsikh in 570, when he posed only the issue of the avar settlement,<sup>23</sup> and the treaty of 574,

<sup>16</sup> Corippus, *Laudem* III, p. 71, 345-349 (engl. translation, p. 109): „So then, the chagan is preparing to bring his standards against mine, and the Avar people threaten me with trumpets and army camps, if we do not grant their treaty? Do you think my father did it through fear, because he gave gifts to the needy and exiled out of pity?“ On the meaning of the technical term *pacta* see K. Synelli, Die Entwicklung der Bedeutung des Terminus „ΠΑΚΤΟΝ“ im Rahmen der Entwicklung der „Internationalen“ Beziehungen von Byzanz vom 4. bis zum 10. Jahrhundert. *Studien zur Geschichte der römischen Spätantike. Festgabe für Professor Johannes Straub*, ed. E. Chrysos, Athens 1989, pp. 234-250.

<sup>17</sup> *Menander*, fr. 8, p. 93: „During the reign of the younger Justin the envoys of the Avars came to Byzantium to receive the usual gifts which the previous Emperor, Justinian, had given to their tribe. These were cords worked with gold which were made to confine what was escaping, and likewise couches and other luxury goods.“. Blockley, *Menander*, p. 261, note 91. Pohl, *Awaren*, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Menander*, fr. 12. 5, p. 135: „But now, if you wish to speak with us of a treaty and of peace, we are most ready. It is for you to look to your own advantage and choose peace over war.“

<sup>19</sup> *Menander*, fr. 12. 6, p. 139: „Bajan, the leader of the Avars, decided to send an embassy and discuss a treaty.“

<sup>20</sup> *Menander*, fr. 12. 6, p. 139: „Moreover, the ownership of it will not change, since it will revert to you through the son if you hand over to him what I have come for: the city of Sirmium, the yearly payments which the Emperor Justinian used to give to the Kutrigurs and Utigurs (since today Bajan is the master of all these tribes)...“

<sup>21</sup> *Menander*, fr. 12. 6, p. 139: „If, as you suggest, we were to give you what Justinian earlier gave to the Huns-out of pity not fear, because he did not wish to shed their blood-, it would be a cause of jest.“

<sup>22</sup> *Menander*, fr. 12. 7, p. 143: „Targitius came again wishing to be granted an audience with the Emperor and made the same proposals and received the same reply as before. Bajan wished the city of Sirmium... and also the money which Justinian paid every year to the Huns. Because they had not received this for the previous years, Targitius asked that he receive all of it in a lump sum and that in future the Romans make the agreed yearly payments.“. The Kutrigurs and the Utigurs had also no status of *foederati*, since Byzantium never accorded them land for settlement within the empire's soil.

<sup>23</sup> *Menander*, fr. 15. 1, p. 149: „Again the Avars sent an embassy to the Romans on the same issues as often before, and the Romans refused to listen to them because the Emperor Justin was not so inclined. Finally, when Apsikh came as envoy, Tiberius and Apsikh's party agreed that the Romans would provide the Avars with land to live on if they received the sons of their leading men as hostages.“. Blockley, *Menander*, p. 270, note 173 (in 570/71). Kollautz, *Völkerbewegungen*, pp. 473-474. Pohl, *Awaren*, p. 63.

after the Byzantine-avar war of this year, which anticipated for the first time the payment of a concrete yearly tribute to the Avars, not for an alliance but in exchange for the peace.<sup>24</sup>

The only exception to the testimony of the sources on the defrayment of payments by Justin to Bajan is reported in the speech of Bonus to the Avar envoys outside to Sirmium in 568.<sup>25</sup> As it becomes obvious from the examination of all the relative fragments, Justin not only refused to agree to yearly payments to the Avars but he suspended the gifts which Justinian used to send to the chagan. The payments which Bonus refers to, should have been offered for an exceptional reason (in analogy to the subsidies which Justinian may have agreed to in 558), without these forming regular yearly payments. They were, according to the words of Justin in 565, „free gift for service“ and not tribute. Such a contingency enforces the assumption of *Avenarius*, *Fritze* and *Schreiner* for incitement and financial support from Byzantium to the Avars to attack the Franks in 566.<sup>26</sup>

Summarizing the testimony of the sources on the avar claims and the Byzantine concessions, there appears in no case a simultaneous provision of regular yearly payments, land and gifts, so as to consider the Avars as federates of Byzantium. Even if we accept that Justinian I made some payments (which is not clear from the embassy of 558), these would be of a voluntary character, as gifts, and didn't consist a regular yearly payment. Consequently, neither the view for a status of *foederati* of the Avars towards Byzantium could be acceptable, nor the view that favourable conditions created the circumstances for such a relation with the alliance of 558 and the mission of *spatharius* Valentinus to the Avars.<sup>27</sup> The Byzantines failed to find in the Avars a loyal ally for the protection of the „extensive corridor“ in the south Russian steppes, since Bajan, after his victorious march, moved to the lower Danube in 562.

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<sup>24</sup> Menander, fr. 15. 5, p. 151: „After the victory of the Avars and the defeat of the general Tiberius, a truce was made...and at least a treaty was made between the Romans and the Avars. „The information on the amount of the yearly tribute derives from a later avar embassy to Constantinople under Targitius in 579, see Menander, fr. 25. 1, p. 217: „When this year Bajan as usual sent Targitius to the emperor to receive the agreed payment (which was eighty thousand *nomismata* per year)... „Blockley, Menander, p. 283, note 294-295. Kollautz, *Nomadenherrschaft*, p. 144. Goubert, *Les Avars*, p. 215. M. Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou, *Συμβολή εις την χρονολογησιν των αβαρικων και σλαβικων επιδρομων επι Μανρικιου (582-602) (μετ επιμετρου περι των Περσικων Πολεμων)*, *Symmeikta* 2 (1970), pp. 147-148. Pohl, *Awaren*, p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> Menander, fr. 12. 5, p. 135: „Furthermore, the Emperor had decided to give you money and handed it to envoys to you.“

<sup>26</sup> Avenarius, *Europa*, p. 59. Fritze, *Bedeutung*, p. 84. P. Schreiner, *Eine merowingische Gesandtschaft in Konstantinopel (590?)*, *Frühmittelalterlichen Studien* 19 (1985), p. 200. On the avar expedition against the Franks see Kollautz-Miyakawa, *Geschichte und Kultur I*, pp. 165, 228. Avenarius, *Europa*, pp. 57-58. Fritze, *Bedeutung*, pp. 78-79, 82. Pohl, *Awaren*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>27</sup> Pohl, *Awaren*, pp. 19, 206.

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## Avari: federáti Byzancie?

### Resumé

V januári roku 558 n. l. uzatvoril cisár Justinián s Avarmi spojenectvo proti kmeňom žijúcim severne od Kaukazu a Čierneho mora (Onogurom, Sabírom a Antom). Napriek tomu, že cisár Avarom poslal iba dary, je spojenectvo medzi Justiniánom a kaganom Bajanom interpretované niektorými bádatelmi ako regrutovanie Avarov do služieb Byzancie pod statusom federátov (foederati). Tento status zahŕňal platenie pravidelných ročných platieb, pridelenie pôdy a dary pre „barbarských“ vodcov ako výmenu za vojenskú pomoc impériu. Výskum príslušných prameňov takýto vzťah medzi Byzanciou a Avarmi nepotvrdil. Okrem toho môžeme pozorovať, že požiadavka ročných platieb zo strany avarských vyslancov smerom ku Konštantínopolu trvala od roku 558 až do roku 574, kedy po byzantsko-avarskej vojne dostali Avari po prvýkrát ročný tribút nie za spojenectvo, ale ako výmenu za mier. Pramene, v ktorých sa hovorí o avarských požiadavkách a ústupkoch Byzancie, nepotvrdzujú tvrdenie o pravidelných ročných platbách, na základe ktorého by sme mohli Avarov považovať za federátov Byzancie.