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THE LETTER SENT BY THE TURK QAĞAN
TO THE EMPEROR MAURICIUS

Summary: The Byzantine historian Theophylactus Simocatta relates that the qağan of the Türks sent a letter to Emperor Mauricius in which he informed him about his victories. Since two and a half century historians reconstructed the history of Avar–Hephthalite–Turk–Chinese relations in the sixties of the VI. century A. D. on the basis of this letter. However, it can be proved that the events, described in the letter, took place between 580 A. D. and 599 A. D. and have nothing to do with the rise of the Turk Empire in the sixties of the VI. century A. D.

Key words: Theophylactus Simocatta, Mauricius, Avar, Hephthalite, Turk, Türk Empire, qağan.

In his Oikumenike historia written during the reign of the Emperor Heraclius (610–641 AD), the Byzantine historian Theophylactus Simocatta inserted an excursus on the Scythian peoples into the narration of the events happened in 596 AD, of the Avar–Byzantine war. He relates that the qağan of the Turks sent envoys and a letter to Mauricius in which he informed the Byzantine emperor about his victories. Theophylactus quotes the introductory formula of the letter, summarizes its contents, describes the victories of the qağan and also expounds his ideas about the Pseudo-Avars, adding a wealth of information concerning Central Asia and China that was obviously based on the information given by the Turk envoys in the Byzantine imperial court.

Theophylactus’ information about the Turk qağan’s letter arouse keen interest in historical research. Ever since almost two and a half centuries ago J. Deguignes noticed the similarities between the reports contained in Chinese historical sources (Wei-shu and Pei-shi) and events described in the Turk qağan’s letter sent to Mauricius, on the strength of which he identified the Juan-juan with the European Avars, no student of Avar history could abstain from examining this question.

According to the Chinese sources, mentioned above, T’u-men (= Bumîn) qağan won a decisive victory over the Juan-juan, a part of whom subsequently fled to the

kingdom of the Chinese Western Wei dynasty. Afterwards, according to another Chinese source, the Sui-shu, Mu-han qayan, successor of Bumin defeated the I-ta (= Hephthalites) during his rule (553–572). In his narration of the contents of the letter Theophylactus again relates the victory of the qayan over the ruler of the Hephthalites and the subjugation of this people. He then proceeded to conclude an alliance with Stemischagan and overthrew the Avars. A part of the defeated Avars fled to the people of Taugast.

The form of the name Taugast appeared to be identifiable with the Turkic word tabgač, meaning ‘China’, ‘Chinese’, thus the events described in the Chinese sources and the ones related by Theophylactus seemed to be similar indeed, in as much as the Chinese and Byzantine sources agree that the Turks defeated the Hephthalites and the Juan-juan, as well as the Avars, and also that one part of the latter fled to China. The identification of these events also seemed to be confirmed by the mention of Stemischagan (= Stembis qayan), in whose name one deemed to discover Istami qayan (555–576), founder of the dynasty of the Western Turk qayans.

Owing to the spectacular coincidence between the data contained in the Chinese and Byzantine sources, the theory of identity of the Juan-juan with the Avars was widely accepted – to the extent that the Juan-juan are usually called ‘Asiatic Avars’ up to now. Only in the 20th century was serious doubt cast on Deguignes’ theory, primarily because Theophylactus called the European Avars Pseudo-Avars. Some scholars therefore rejected the identification of the Juan-juan with the European Avars and regarded the latter as a detachment of the Ogurs, i.e. Oguz that escaped fro Asia.

The question of origin of the European Avars was even more complicated by the fact that Theophylactus regarded them as a people consisting of two tribes and called the two ethnic groups Uar and Chunni. In the element Uar one believed to discover the name Hua, used for the Hephthalites in Chinese sources; one tried namely to interprete it as Var on the basis of the Hephthalite town of Varvaliz. This led to the conclusion that the European Avars were properly Hephthalites. The most extreme attempt to combine the linguistic and historical evidence – that can be interpreted variously – is, however, represented by the theory according to which the Var and the Chunni were the two ethnic components of the Juan-juan and thus the Hephthalites can be identified with the Juan-juan, the implication being that both the Avars and

7 Csongor, op. cit. (note 4), 8.

the Pseudo-Avars could equally be of Juan-juan and Hephthalite origin at the same time. 11

In order to elucidate the real value of this mass of assumptions, first of all we
to examine whether the events described in the Turk qayan’s letter and the Chi-
nese sources are identical. Earlier research had already noted certain contradic-
tions between Theophylactus’ report and the Chinese sources: the sequence of events dif-
fered and the victories were won in an earlier period than the rule of the qayan who
had sent the letter; and, also, that these victories occurred during the lives of at least
three different qayans. 12 These statements necessarily resulted from the earlier as-
sumption that the Turk qayan’s letter described the same events as the ones contained
in the Chinese sources. In this context, it must also be noted that the identification of
events, persons and place names mentioned in the letter have proved unsuccessful to
a great extent so far. Attempts have been made only to identify the victories won over
the Tien-lé, the Juan-juan and the I-ta with the wars against the Hephthalites, the
Avars and the Ogurs, but even the chronological sequence of these events is reversed.

The state of the studies in this field were aptly characterized by E. Chavannes,
well before the above bold theory was formulated: “Bien des points restent encore
obscure dans le texte de Theophylact. Qui sont les Kolkh? Qui sont Sparzeugoun,
Kounaxola et Tuldikh qui prétérèrent leur appui au kagan et qui est Touroum son
ennemi? Où se trouvait la localité appelée Ikar, et la ville de Bakath élevée par les
Ounougours, et celle de Taugast dont le nom devint chez les peuples turcs celui par
lequel ils désignaient les Chinois? Autant des questions auxquelles nous ne pouvont
pas répondre d’une manière scientifique et que nous préférerons ne pas résoudre à grand
renfort de fragiles hypothèses.” 13

Let us examine the letter itself and the data contained in it. The letter of the
Turk qayan, described by Theophylactus as an ἀξιωτικόν, a ‘triumphal report’, repres-
ents a well-known literary genre in the Ancient Near East. This is the feth-náme, the
‘triumphal letter’, usually sent by a king to the rulers of other lands he has relations
with. 14 Two famous examples can be mentioned in this respect: Dareios I’s Bisitun
inscription whose text was sent to all the countries of his empire and Šāhpur I’s in-
scription on the Ka’be-yi Zardušt in which he announced his victories over the Ro-
mans to the kings of the neighbouring lands. The information in the feth-náme was
usually precise and timely. The mention of earlier events as contemporary ones and
of victories won by other rulers was incompatible with its object to have a strong ef-
fect on the kings of his age. The boast of deeds, well-known long since or the expro-
 priation of victories, won by ancestors, would have deprived the feth-náme of its trust-
worthiness. It is therefore highly unlikely that the Turk qayan would have mentioned
the exploits of other qayans as his own or that he would have described events that
had occurred half a century earlier.

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11 This theory has been discussed in detail by CZÉGLÉDY, K.: Nomád népek vándorlása Nap-
kelettől Napnyugtáig [Migration of nomadic peoples from East to West]. Budapest 1969, 84–89, 152.
12 CZÉGLÉDY, op.cit. (note 11), 103.
13 CHAVANNES, op. cit. (note 5), 251.
14 For the feth-náme cp. FEKETE, L.: A feth-námeről [The feth-náme]. MTA I OK 19, 1969,
65–117.
Another important feature of the Turk qayan’s letter is that it was written in Sogdian using the Sogdian script. At the time of the emergence of the Turk Empire, the Turks were still allied with Persians with whom they overthrew the Hephthalites. At that time, the Persian scribes sent by the Säsäni king were still active in the Turk qayan’s court and it was they who managed his correspondence. Later, around 570 the relations between the Turks and the Persians deteriorated and a war broke out between them. The Western Turk qayan replaced the Persian scribes who were deemed unreliable with Sogdian ones and maintained diplomatic relations even with Byzantium with their help.\(^{15}\) This change is reflected by the replacement of Σιλαξιβολιος, the Persian form of the Western Turk qayan’s name with Σιλβιβολιος, its Sogdian equivalent in the reports of the Turk missions to the Byzantine imperial court. This is an important recognition since this Sogdian ‘mediation’ must be borne in mind when identifying Turkic and Chinese forms of words, arrived at the Byzantine imperial court and to Theophylactus. This helps us to solve the problem of the ethnic name Οὐργονίττα as well.

The third important task in relation to Theophylactus’ report is the separation of the layers of different origins. Most important in historical terms is the information contained in the Turk qayan’s letter, such as the wars waged by him. Other information were obviously supplied by members of the Turkic delegation who had delivered the letter. These include information on the history of China, Chinese life and Chinese customs. We must also distinguish Theophylactus’ own additions, such as his expositions concerning the Pseudo-Avars. Let us begin with this latter.

E. Norden has already noted that Theophylactus’ narrative about the Pseudo-Avars – that they only used the fearful name Avar to terrify in the peoples they attacked – is a classical ethnographic topos of antiquity that was fairly common in Graeco-Roman historical works.\(^{16}\) By using this literary topos Theophylactus hoped to reduce the prestige of the Avars as enemies of Byzantium.

Accordingly Pseudo-Avars had never existed in reality. However, even if Όύάρ and Χουννι, the ancestors of the Ogurs are simply inventions by Theophylactus, the fact remains that the ethnic name Οὐργονίττα did already exist in earlier Byzantine historical sources since this it became known in Byzantium at the imperial court at the time of Valentinus’ second mission to the Turks, in 576.\(^{17}\)

Since by that time the Turks already employed Sogdian scribes and interpreters in their diplomatic relations, the ethnic name Οὐργονίττα is obviously a Sogdian form of name for denoting the Avars. It is again clear from Theophylactus’ text that Οὐργονίττα (Ούάρ + Χουννι) was the general name of the Ogur tribes and that its meaning may well have been ‘Turk’. Since the Persians called the Turks Κιμίρχυν, ‘Red Hun’, and since the form, corresponding to Middle Persian xyūn, was xün in Sogdian, obviously we may regard the Sogdian ethnic name Várخūn ‘Turk’ as the


\(^{17}\) Menander 205 (Exc. de leg. De Boor).

equivalent of Middle Persian Kirmîryûn and interpret it as ‘Red Hun’. As a matter of fact, the Yidgha, one of the Eastern Iranian languages preserved the word vûr, ‘light red’,\(^{18}\) that can go back to Old Iranian *barva*. This Old Iranian form may have survived in the form *vâr* in Early Medieval Sogdian in the 6th century.

Consequently, the Uarchonites = pseudo-Avars did not exist as a separate people, but then neither did the ethnic element *Var*. This was simply assumed on the basis of Chinese Hua, the name of the Hephthalites in Chinese historical sources, since its original prototype was restored as the form *Var*.\(^{19}\) However, the Hephthalite form of Chinese Hua, Ancient Chinese γωτ, Northwestern T’ang \(γ'\)aʊ > \(χ'\)aʊ can be restored variously. The form *Var* represents but one of several possibilities – this form was preferred because it seemed to correspond to the ethnic name of the alleged *Var* people. The existence of this people still needs to be proven, even more so, since there is no reliable evidence for their actual existence. On the basis of the above, Northwestern T’ang \(χ'\)aʊ can be interpreted as γωτ and identified with the ethnic name Qalač,\(^{20}\) the name of the Turkicized Hephthalites that still sounded Xvalic (Xoaƣtau)\(^{21}\) in the 6th century according to the report of Zemarchus, the Byzantine envoy to the Turks. The final -č in the form Xvalič is an adjectival suffix, while the word γωτ- is of Eastern Iranian origin and means ‘lord’.

The alleged existence of the ethnic group *Var* cannot be proven by the name of the Hephthalite town of Varvaliz either. This phonetic form indicates its Bactrian origin and contains the Bactrian word liz, ‘fortress’,\(^{22}\) the equivalent of Old Persian daiz- and Middle Persian dēz, both meaning ‘fortress’. Varwa-, the first element of the place-name represents the Bactrian outcome varlva > varva- of Old Iranian *rōva-*, ‘up, upper, straight, high’ that survives in Munji valvo < Old Iranian *rōva-ka*, ‘up, upper’.\(^ {23}\) The meaning of the place-name Varvaliz was ‘Upper Fortress, Citadel’ and has nothing to do with the alleged ethnic name *Var* or with the word vûr, ‘red’, occurring in the ethnic name Värxûn, ‘red Hun’.

The source of the information on China contained in Theophylactus’ narrative can obviously be traced to the Sogdian members of the mission sent by the Turk qarán. Being merchants, the Sogdians were no doubt familiar with the Chinese history of the period; we know from the Sogdian “Ancient letters” that many communities of Sogdian merchants flourished in the Chinese cities. The Sogdian members of the Turk mission no doubt provided an accurate and detailed description of Chinese society and culture, as well as of contemporary events. The two Northern Chinese kingdoms, separated by the river Huang-ho, and ruled by the Pei-Ts’i and the Pei-Chou dynasties, were united under the Pei-Chou dynasty some time before, in 577. The Chinese sources verify that the soldiers of the latter wore black uniforms indeed.

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\(^{19}\) Markwart, op. cit. (note 9), 45.


\(^{21}\) Menander 195 (Exc. de leg. De Boor).


\(^{23}\) Morgenstierne, op. cit. (note 18), 258.

while the clothing of the population living in the kingdom of the Pei-Ts’i was red in colour.  

Other informations from the Sogdian envoys can be traced back to the Sogdian Alexander novel, according to which the two Chinese capitals, Χουσου and Τανγάτ had been founded by Alexander the Great. Χουσου (= Xumān) had already been identified with the Chinese capital Ch ’ang-an earlier.  

According to another passage in the Alexander novel preserved in an Arabic source, Alexander had founded two cities, Xumān and Saray in China. The identity of Saray with Lo-yang, the other Chinese capital can be proven with the aid of a Sanskrit-Chinese vocabulary. Consequently, the equivalences Xumān : Taugast = Xumān : Saray and the identity of Saray with Lo-yang demonstrates that Taugast was the name of the Chinese capital Lo-yang.  

The Greek spelling Ταγάστ reflects the transliteration of a Sogdian form: Ταβγα. In the Greek transliteration the letter ц would be more suitable for the phoneme ċ, but exciting barbarian impression it became to be replaced with στ that was more acceptable to the erudite Greek reader. The Sogdian name Taβga was also borrowed by the Turks in the form Taβγα ~ Tawγα ~ Tawğa, meaning ‘China, Chinese’.  

It has since long been known that this expression comes from the name of the Chinese T’o-pa dynasty that was of Turkic origin, but its formation and etymology remained unclear. The Ancient Chinese phonemic form of the dynastic name T’o-pa was T’ak-b’u&t, while its Northwestern T’ang form can be restored as T’ay-b’az that might have been the Chinese transliteration of a foreign form *Tayfark. The latter was obviously a loanword from Iranian tāfsar < Old Iranian *tāga-bara-, ‘wearing the crown’ > ‘king’, similarly to the Armenian borrowing t’agavor, ‘king’. According to the Chinese, the meaning of the name T’o-pa was ‘Prince of the Earth’ and this harmonizes neatly with the meaning of Iranian: *tāfšar, ‘king’.  

In Sogdian, the form *tāfšar developed from *tāşar by metathesis and the form tāfšar meaning ‘Chinese’ was formed by adding the adjectival suffix -č. Thus, the Sogdian name of Lo-yang may have been *Tāfšarč kanθ or – since the phoneme r often disappeared in Sogdian in this position – *Tāfšarč kanθ, ‘Chinese town’. Xumānč kanθ, ‘Ch’ang-an’, and Cinānč kanθ, ‘Turfan’ can be quoted as parallels to the place-name *Tāfšarč kanθ. The Sogdian name for Lo-yang could have appeared in this form in the Turk qayan’s letter, written in Sogdian.  

As regards the actual essence of the Turk qayan’s letter, what must first be noted is that scholarship has since long succeeded in determining the identity of the qayan from Chinese sources. The letter was sent by the qayan Ta-t’ou, who is identi-

26 SCHAEFER, op. cit. (note 25) 46–49.  
27 SCHAEFER, op. cit. (note 25) 44, with earlier literature.  
cal with Menander’s Táropolis and who ruled from 576 to 603. Thus, the union of the two Northern Chinese kingdoms occurred during his reign. The most recent event related in the letter was the war against Turum (Τορούμ), a relative of the qayan and the death of Turum respectively. Only one single attempt has been made to identify Turum—according to this attempt he is identical with the Hephthalite king Toramana.

Still, even neglecting the difference between the two names that cannot be explained by this assumption, this identification must be rejected on the grounds that Toramana was active in Western Iran and Western India in the years around 512, implying that he could hardly have met Tardu qayan, nor could he have been his relative.

Notwithstanding, the name and the person of Turum and the events associated with him can be reassuringly identified by the help of the Chinese sources. Tardu qayan had a second cousin called Tu-lan, the Northern Turk Qayan who ruled between 587 and 599. Tardu waged a war against Tu-lan who was killed by his soldiers in 599. This allowed Tardu qayan to consider himself the monarch of both the Western and the Northern Turk Empire when he sent the letter and to assume the boastful title κύρως κλιμάκτων τῆς σύγκυρας επτά used in it. The name Tu-lan derives from Ancient Chinese Tuo-lâm in which the velar اختبار can also represent a foreign u vowel (cp. the Chinese [= Northwestern T’ang] transliteration sàt’u of Saka Suhadatti). Consequently, the foreign prototype of Tuo-lâm can be restored in the form Turum without any difficulty.

The names and persons of the other Turk rulers who helped Tardu can also be identified. Τουλούς was Tardu’s son; his name appears as Tu-liu in the Chinese sources. The Ancient Chinese form of Tu-liu was Tuo-liuk, while its Northwestern T’ang variant can be restored as T’ö-liu, this latter perhaps being the Chinese transliteration of a Turk name, Toliq, a phonetic variant of Toluq that occurs in Old Turkic (in the name Toluq Tükä). The letters ꝥ in the Greek transliteration can be attributed to the Sogdian mediation since Sogdian l had two phonetic values: ꝥ and ꝥ. Thus the interpretation of the Sogdian spelling of the name became uncertain.

Σπάρζινοσ was a great-grandson of Tardu qayan; his full name was I-p’i [sha-jp-lo szu yeh-hu] according to the Chinese sources. Σπάρζινοσ, the Byzantine transliteration contains the two most important elements, sha-po-lo (Ancient Chinese sà-p’uát-là, Northwestern T’ang sà-p’uá-là) and yeh-hu (Ancient Chinese jāp-yuo, Northwestern T’ang jāb-y’o), in other words, the titles ispara and yâbhu, the latter in its Western Turkic form jebbû. The third Turk ruler, K筹νζολάν can be identified with Kiu-na shê, another great-grandson of Tardu, if we assume a confusion of ꝥ with ou in Theophylactus’ codices and take the form K筹νζολάν as a starting point.

31 CHAVANNES, op. cit. (note 5), 50.
32 HAUSSSIG, op. cit. (note 2), 379 ff.
34 CHAVANNES, op. cit. (note 5), 50.
36 CHAVANNES, op. cit. (note 5), 3.
37 Древнетюркий словарь. Leningrad 1961, 574.
38 CHAVANNES, op. cit. (note 5), 3.
39 Ibid.

The Ancient Chinese form of the name Κια-να σέ was Ka-nà šjat, while its North-western T’ang development can be restored as Ka-nà šáž, the latter form being the transliteration of Qanaq, a Turk name, and the title šād. The use of o instead of a and of λ instead of τ in the Greek transliteration can be explained by the oft-occurring confusion of these characters with one another in the Theophylactus codices.40

On the basis of the above we may conclude that Tardu qāyān informed the Emperor Mauricius of his strife against his second cousin, Turum Tu-lan, the Northern Turk qāyān between 595 and 599 and that members of the Western Turk qāyān’s dynasty, namely Tuliq, Ḫpara jēfyû and Qanaq šad helped him in this war.

The events, identified so far, took place in the years before the letter was written. In the first place, however, the letter mentioned the victory won by Tardu qāyān over the Abdels. The Greek text has an accompanying note, according to which the Abdels are the Hephthalites. This note was probably added by Theophylactus to explain the meaning of the ethnic name Ἀβδηλαῖς. This name remained an unsolved problem in historical research,41 although it can be easily explained if we bear in mind that the letter was written in Sogdian. In Sogdian the Old Iranian consonant clusters -śt- and -ṛ- became voiced -βκ- and -γδ-, moreover the Old Iranian initial h-disappeared (as in Old Iranian hafta-, ‘seven’ > Sogdian ḫb, read aβdk).42 In accordance with this phonetic law, the form hafta developed into abdal – abdel regularly. The greater part of the Hephthalites – the Hephthalite kingdoms surviving in Eastern Iran and Western India – came under Persia rule around 560, but after 571 they became subjects of the Turks.43 When Tardu qāyān came into power, the Hephthalite kingdoms that had earlier been subjected by the Sāsānian rulers had come under Turk supremacy only shortly before and had, according to Chinese sources, revolted against their new overlords in 582.44 It was this revolt that had been suppressed by Tardu qāyān. The letter therefore mentioned not the Hephthalite principalities on Sogdian territory that had been subjected to the Turks long since, but a Hephthalite kingdom that had survived on the territory of Toxarištān that had only come under Turkic rule shortly before.

The letter then went on to describe the alliance concluded by Tardu qāyān with the Stembischagan. The name Stembis reminds of Istāmī, qāyān of the Western Turk tribes with whom it is usually identified.45 This identification encounters, however, unsurmountable difficulties. Istāmī qāyān was Tardu’s father and, together with his brother Bumūn qāyān, the founder of the Turk Empire. On the testimony of the Orkhon inscriptions, his memory lively survived in the historical consciousness of the Turks as late as the 8th century. It is most unlikely that Tardu would have attributed his

40 E.g. a ~ o: Ἀξβας ~ Ὠβας 150/21, Ἀγος ~ Λόγος- 240/16, 117/3, Ἁδωρ ~ Ἁδωρ 130/24; ἡ ~ ἡ, ἁγελακούντας ~ ἁγελακουντας 107/1.
41 C. HAUSSEG, op. cit. (note 2), 325.
42 GERSHEVITCH, op. cit. (note 29) 197 (§ 1316).
44 CHAVANNES, op. cit. (note 5) 49.
45 This identification was first proposed by MARQUART, J.: Historische Glossen zu den alttürkischen Inschriften. WKZM 12, 1898, 185 ff.
father’s deeds to himself. Moreover, there are some phonetic difficulties in identifying the name Istãmi with Στεμβίς. The spelling -μβ- in the name Στεμβίς cannot represent the -m- of Istãmi, because its phonetic value was -mb- or -m-. As shown by the Byzantine transliteration of the ethnic name Ὠμβρός, we have to reckon with the phonetic value of -b- in the case of the consonant cluster -μβ- already at the time (6th century) that the letter was sent by the Turk qañan. Consequently, the spelling Στεμβίς should be interpreted as Stebi-. Still, in view of the transliteration of Taβ licensed as Ὠμβρός, we must also consider the possibility that the letters -στ replaced the spelling -τζ also in Στεμβίς. The phonetic form of this name could thus equally well have been Čebi or Ķebi. In this case the form Στεμβίς can be identified with the name of Še-pi qañan of the Chinese sources since the Ancient Chinese phonetic form of the latter, Dzę-i-βjí, corresponds exactly to Ķebi, the presumable phonetic value of the spelling Στεμβίς.

This, in turn, fully changes the historical perspective of the events in question. Ķebi (=Še-pi) qañan was the son of Tardu qañan and brother of Tuldich, who is also mentioned in the letter. His participation in the events at his father’s side is thus entirely understandable.

One task still remains, namely the identification of the peoples who, according to the letter, had been defeated by Tardu qañan. These peoples were the Avars (Ἄβαρος), the Ogurs (Ὁγῶρος) and the Kolch (Κολχή). The problem of the Ogurs can be resolved fairly easily. According to the letter, they lived in the region of the river Tô, called Μέλαζα, i.e. ‘Black’. In this we can easily recognize the name Qara Itil ‘Black Itil’ of the Volga river, that has remained in use up to the present time. These Ogur tribes, living in a loose tribal organization in the Volga region, came under the rule of the Western Turks around 580. They are not identical with the Tieh-lé (Oguz) tribes of Inner Asia who had been defeated by Bumín qañan before he turned against the Juan-juan. Thus, after the disappearance of Istãmi qañan, we can eliminate the last element from Tardu qañan’s letter through which the events reported in the letter can be linked to the ‘Turks’ victory over the Juan-juan.

Let us now turn to the role of the Avars and the Kolch. The Sui-shu mentions a tribe called A-pa among the Tieh-lé tribes whose revolt led to the fall of Tardu qañan in 603. The Ancient Chinese phonetic form of this tribal name was ‘ā-b‘wat, while its Northwestern T‘ang development may have been ‘ā-b ‘at. Therefore, it can be plausibly regarded as the Chinese transliteration of the tribal name Apar ~ Abar ~ Avar. The Tieh-lé (= Oguz) tribes represented an important, but constantly turbulent ethnic element in the Turk Empire and the qañans had to repeatedly compel them to recognize their overlordship. Examining this brief period of a few decades that is documented in the historical sources, we find the following. In 603, the revolt of the Tieh-lé overthrew Tardu qañan. Ch‘u-lo qañan, ruling between 604 and 611, was often defeated by the Tieh-lé and finally escaped to China in 611. Shih-kuei qañan

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46 Moravcsik, Gy.: Byzantinoturcica II. Berlin 1958, 217.

who assumed power after him was compelled to withdraw his army advancing victoriously in Iran owing to the revolt of the Tiehl-lé. This results from the fact that his successor, Ton Yabyu qayan had to defeat the Tiehl-lé tribes in order to consolidate his power. In 627, towards the end of his rule, the Tiehl-lé again revolted against him and they similarly revolted against Sé-pi qayan who came to power after him between 628 and 630. The qayan who came to power after Sé-pi was again forced to quell the restless Tiehl-lé tribes. When the Tiehl-lé suffered a defeat, they usually fled to the Chinese. But when the Tiehl-lé defeated the Turk qayan, the latter also fled to the Chinese. 49 Thus the Tiehl-lé, i.e. the Oguz tribes revolted repeatedly under the Western Turk qayans and the defeated party usually fled to the Chinese. The events described in Tardu qayan’s ‘triumphant letter’ were off-recurring typical events in Central Asia and had nothing to do with Bumin qayan’s victory over the Juan-juan in 552.

As regards the identification of the Kolch (Kôlχ) it must first be noted that their name cannot be identified with the ethnic name Qalač or with the Mongolian tribal name Halha.50 It cannot be identified with the former since the contemporary Byzantine transliteration was Χωλίκα and in any case, the final -χ of Kôlχ cannot be interpreted as a -č either. Neither is the identification of the Kôlχ with the Mongolian tribe of Halha possible since this tribe – even if it had existed in the 6th century – lived on the territory of the Northern Turk Empire and Tardu could hardly have led a military campaign against them. We should rather consider the possibility that the spelling Kôlχ, reflecting Sogdian mediation, conceals the ethnonym Qarluq. In Sogdian the Turk q phoneme was represented by χ and thus the Sogdian form of the ethnonym Qarluq may have been Xallulχ since the consonant cluster -l- did not exist in Sogdian. This form was then also adopted and used by Arab and Persian geographers.51 Aside from Xallulχ a form Xulχ could also have existed in Sogdian, as shown by the form sumdr- that developed from the Sanskrit samudra- in Sogdian.52 The Byzantine spelling, Kôlχ could well be the transliteration of such a Sogdian form in which the dissimilation χ > χ > k -χ occurred according to Greek phonetic law. The Qarluq were under Western Turk rule, but they often revolted against it and played an important role in the fall of the Turk Empire. Their historical role is typical even from the perspective of the Turk qayan’s letter to the Emperor Mauricius.

In the light of the above arguments, it is fairly clear that the events described in the Turk qayan’s letter that took place between 580 and 599 have nothing to do with the historical events that occurred almost fifty years earlier and can be associated with the rise of the Turk Empire. This conclusion can also be helpful in clarifying the origins of the European Avars.

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49 Chavannes, op. cit. (note 5), 14, 15, 24, 26, 52, 88, 89, 116, 175.
50 Haussig, op. cit. (note 2) 372 (Kolch = Halha); Czeglédy, op. cit (note 11) 40 (Kolch = Qalač).
51 Hudaq Al-ʿAlam, op. cit. (note 20), 286.
52 Gershevitch, op. cit. (note 29) 38 (§ 180).