Ádám Bollók

A Century of Gold

The Rise and Glory of the Avar Khaganate in the Carpathian Basin

Hereditas Archaeologica Hungariae

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Foreword

Peeking from behind their selfie sticks and cameras, visitors arriving to the Old Continent from regions beyond the European cultural sphere may be surprised to discover that the buildings housing various cultural institutions such as the museums and opera houses erected in the nineteenth century are invariably prominent elements of a cityscape that can be recognised from afar owing to their highly similar appearance. Should they also visit the one-time lands of the ancient Greek world and the Roman Empire, they will no doubt become aware of the similarities between the overall design and impact of the colonnaded portico and the steps leading to the main entrance of these buildings and the Greek and Roman sanctuaries erected in honour of the gods two millennia ago. The main façade of the buildings erected to serve as the "sanctuaries of culture" was often inspired by classical temples, one of the many testimonies to the lasting impact of the culture of the Mediterranean world of Antiquity on European culture.

The present volume offers a narrative of the encounter between the Avars, a people arriving to Europe from the distant East, and the late antique Mediterranean world through the study of events that took place over a thousand years ago. Although the Avar political rule over the Carpathian Basin lasted for some two and a half centuries from 567–568 onward, the emphasis here is on the first, shorter half of this quarter-millennium, which roughly spans the first two of the three chronological units of the Avar period, traditionally divided into an Early, Middle, and Late Avar period by archaeological scholarship.[1] The first century of the Avar Khaganate in the Carpathian Basin was synchronous with the final century of Late Antiquity, the last major independent period of Antiquity in the Mediterranean Basin.

While this period saw the rise of the new early medieval kingdoms in the westerly and central regions of Europe, Roman rule had not collapsed and still flourished in the eastern Mediterranean, from the Balkan Peninsula to Egypt. Following the symbolic fall of the western empire in 476, the Eastern Roman Empire with its capital in Constantinople—usually called Byzantium in modern historical studies—continued its existence for almost another millennium, until 1453, although with shifting territorial extent. At the beginning of our story in the mid-sixth century, Byzantium enjoyed a period of prosperity, albeit under the shadow of a gathering storm. Less than a century later, this polity, which to all appearances was at the peak of its power around the time of the Avars' arrival, suddenly collapsed with an immense rumble, burying under itself large portions of the ancient world and the neighbouring realms bound to it by a myriad strands. Yet, the rich legacy of Graeco-Roman culture did not vanish without a trace—it cast a powerful shadow over the minds and deeds of medieval men and has stayed with us to this very day.

Fig. 1. Portrait of Justinian I on the apse mosaic of the San Vitale in Ravenna, made during his reign

Introduction

Encountering the Other

The envoys of a strange new people showed up in the imperial palace of Constantinople in the late 550s, during the final decade of the long reign of the Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565; *Fig. 1*). The envoys and their lords who had sent them "called themselves Avars".[2] The real surprise was decidedly not caused by the appearance of a new ethnonym, treated by the contemporaries as one never previously heard of in Constantinople, whose administration by political necessity made every effort to be well informed. The masters of the Roman state had become well accustomed during the centuries to the arrival of new groups along the Empire's northern frontier, many of them unknown or simply known by another name. The astonishment among the imperial capital's population, home to the men and women of the multitude of peoples inhabiting the vast empire (*Fig. 2*), who had ample opportunity to witness the exotic and the bizarre, was no doubt caused by the envoys' strange

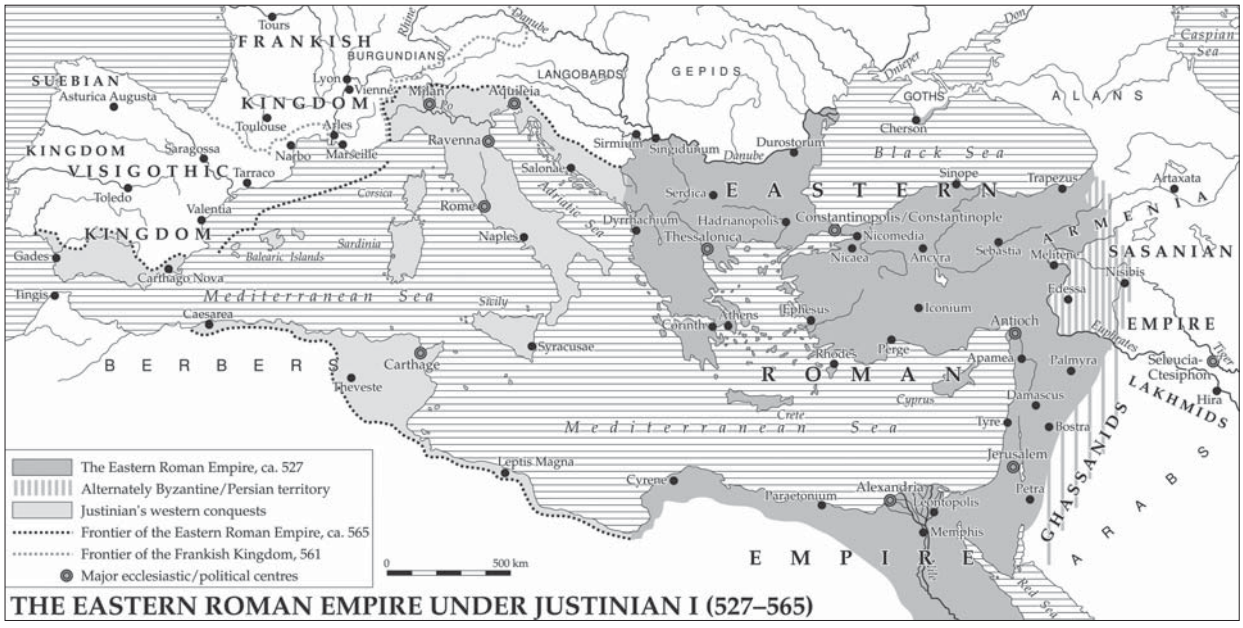

Fig. 2. The extent of the Eastern Roman Empire in the time of Justinian I

appearance. For example, John Malalas, an Antiochian-born contemporary living and writing in Constantinople during the second half of Justinian's reign, described them as an "outlandish tribe".[3] Judging from a remark made by John of Ephesus, another contemporary, some people saw them as downright hideous, perhaps because of the unusual way they wore their hair.[4] Writing some two and a half centuries after the event, but basing his account on earlier sources—among them possibly a more detailed variant of Malalas's text than what has come down to us—Theophanes's chronicle records that upon the arrival of this "strange race … everyone thronged to gaze at them as they had never before seen such a people. They wore their hair very long at the back, tied with ribbons and plaited. The rest of their clothing," he adds, "was like that of the other Huns."[5] No matter whence Theophanes drew his description, his words confirm Agathias's observation, also residing in the imperial city at the time, that the Avar envoys' hair was "unkempt, dry and dirty and tied up in an unsightly knot."[6]

It would appear that this peculiar hairstyle was singled out not solely because of the predisposition of the populace of the culturally colourful world of the late antique Mediterranean to exaggerate unusual traits. On the testimony of a bone artefact found near Subotica (Hung. Szabadka, Serbia) in the southerly region of the Avar-period Carpathian Basin, the Avars themselves regarded their long plaited hair hanging down their back as one of the salient traits of their appearance (*Fig. 3*). The convergence of in- and out-group perceptions on this point is hardly mere chance. Regrettably, the exact location of the Avars' earlier settlement territory before their migration to the Eastern European steppe in the 550s cannot be precisely determined based on the current evidence available to archaeological scholarship. What can be collated from the written sources, the physical anthropological record, and the genetic analyses on human bone samples is that a major portion of the groups styling themselves as Avars may have earlier lived somewhere in the Rouran Empire, perhaps in its westerly areas or slightly farther to the west, somewhere in the broader region of Kazakhstan.[7] Although dating from a somewhat later period than the Avars' arrival to Europe, the funerary statues found in the easterly part of this extensive region clearly illustrate that the custom of wearing one's hair

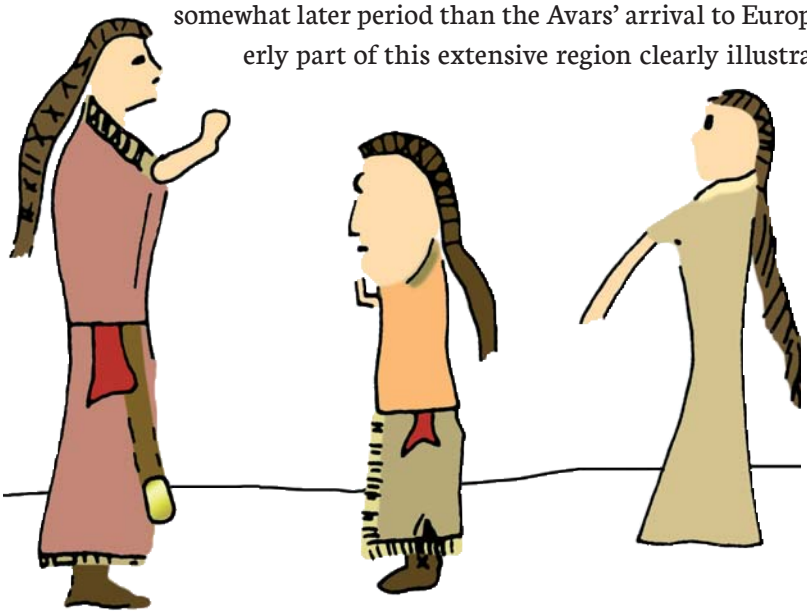

Fig. 3. Coloured reconstruction drawing of the depictions incised onto an Avar-period bone container from Hajdukovo-Nosa-Pereš (Hung. Hajdújárás-Nosza-Pörös), Serbia

Fig. 4. 1. Stone statues portraying Türk men with their distinctive hairstyle from the mausoleum of Emperor Tai-tsung (r. 627–649) and his wife (Zhaoling), China
2. Coloured reconstruction of a funerary statue from the territory of the Western Türk Khaganate, Korumdu, Isik-köl region, Kyrgyzstan

either loose or plaited was fairly widespread (*Fig. 4*). The Türks were similarly portrayed with their hair plaited into long braids on the Afrasiab frescoes (modern Samarkand in Uzbekistan) dating from the middle third of the seventh century, a century later than the Avars' appearance in Eastern Europe.[8]

On the testimony of the Byzantine sources cited in the above, this unusual hairstyle not only distinguished the mid-sixth-century newcomers from the population of the Mediterranean, but also lent the Avars their distinctive look among the contemporaneous peoples of the Eastern European steppe and East Central Europe. The anthropological and genetic record would suggest that the "ugliness" and unusual appearance of the Avar envoys mentioned by John of Ephesus cannot be solely attributed to the peculiar way they wore their hair, but that the

Fig. 5. Skull and facial reconstruction of the man interred in Grave 1 of Kunbábony

Mongolian traits of their face (*Fig. 5*) and their overall physique too played a role in this perception among the peoples of the Mediterranean world, who, according to Ammianus Marcellinus, the fourth-century Roman historian of Syrian ancestry, had found the Huns an equally hideous people.[9]

The discovery of Byzantium for Early Avar studies

Given their Asian descent and looks, we could reasonably expect that various elements alluding to that region would be demonstrable in the archaeological record of the two-and-half-century-long Avar rule over the Carpathian Basin from 567–568 onward, and this is indeed the case in many respects. The scholars engaged in the study of this period during the past 150 years have identified several burial customs and artefact types (*Figs 6–7*) that point towards the east, to the steppe and the vast grasslands of Asia. What came as a genuine surprise in the late 1980s was that many Avar finds turned out to share affinities with the material culture of the Mediterranean world in the broader sense, and specifically of the Eastern Roman Empire ruling the eastern Mediterranean Basin, the arch-enemy of the Avars as recorded in the written sources. Moreover, the finds reflecting contact with the Mediterranean accounted for a by no means negligible portion of the period's material record, their significance enhanced by the fact that many pieces were parts of the magnificent and lavish assemblages of the seventh century.

It would be a mistake to claim that the Eastern Roman connections of the Avar-period archaeological relics of the Carpathian Basin had only been recognised for what they were during the past few decades—even if a perceptible upsurge of scholarly interest in this material undoubtedly fell into this period. Quite to the contrary: the chronological assignment of the burials to the first century of Avar rule


1


2

Fig. 6. Early Avar-period funerary sacrifice and its reconstruction. 1. Sacrificial assemblage from Prigrevica (Hung. Bácsszentiván), Serbia. 2. Reconstruction of the Szeged-Csengele assemblage, displayed between 1990 and 2006 as part of the permanent archaeological exhibition of the Móra Ferenc Museum, Szeged

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Fig. 8. 1–2. Byzantine gold sheet fragments re-used as fittings for a sword and a solidus bearing the portrait of Justinian I, minted during his reign, from the richly furnished burial at Kunágota, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. 3. One possible reconstruction of the original casket based on the gold sheet fragments, courtesy of the Consiglio Nazionale delle Richerche – Istituto per le technologie applicate ai beni culturali, Rome

Fig. 9. Mediterranean-type artefacts in the Early Avar-period archaeological record. 1. Ring-and-dot decorated pouch fastener carved from antler, Szekszárd-Tószegi-dűlő, Grave 1706, Wosinsky Mór County Museum, Szekszárd. 2. Pin with bird-shaped head, and the enlargement of its head, Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út, Grave 79, Wosinsky Mór County Museum, Szekszárd. 3. Yassi Ada-type buckle, Várpalota-Gimnázium, Grave 192, Laczkó Dezső Museum, Veszprém. 4. Pectoral cross with Greek inscription, Závod, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. 5. Cast copper-alloy finger-ring with Christian symbols, Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery A, Grave 245, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

in the Carpathian Basin was enabled in the 1870s by the gold coins (solidi) issued by the Eastern Roman emperors found in these graves (*Fig. 8.2*).[10] For a long time, specialists tended to focus their attention on the finds that could be securely identified as Byzantine based on their inscriptions (*Fig. 9.4*) or imagery, and thus the origin of pieces such as the gold sheets remade into fittings for the Kunágota sword (*Fig. 8.1, 3*) and the jewellery items and costume accessories adorned with Christian depictions has since long been obvious.[11] However, only from the final decade of the twentieth century onward did the period's scholarship realize that the cultural impact of the Mediterranean world had made a much deeper inroad into the Avar-period population of the Carpathian Basin. Since then, several dozen studies have been devoted to this issue and the Mediterranean origin or affinities of various belt fittings, earrings, finger-rings, bracelets, necklaces, metal vessels, and other artefact types has been convincingly demonstrated (*Fig. 9.1–3, 5*). A monographic catalogue of the Byzantine articles in the sixth- and seventh-century Avar-period material record was assembled by the turn of the millennium, followed by a spate of new studies on these finds and comprehensive analyses, adding a wealth of previously unknown details to our knowledge.[12]

Khagans: "gatherers of peoples"—New avenues in the study of the Avar-period archaeological legacy

The proliferation of scholarly works during the past three decades has brought not only a better understanding of the Mediterranean connections of the Avar-period find material, but has simultaneously also drawn a significantly new picture with many novel hues of the various classes of the sixth- and seventh-century archaeological relics of the Carpathian Basin.

There has always been a general scholarly consensus that the presence of a population with Roman cultural traditions can be assumed in certain parts of southern Transdanubia, principally at Keszthely and in its broader area even as late as the sixth to seventh centuries. The ancestry of this population remains controversial, with some scholars making a case for an origin reaching back to the close of the Roman rule in the 420s–430s, and others arguing for communities transplanted by the Avars from the northern Balkans. Today, both are regarded as potential regions of origin instead of one excluding the other, even if some minor details continue to be debated. It has also become clear that the presence of other population groups—most likely predominantly speaking Germanic tongues—can be assumed in both Transdanubia and the Tisza region after their subjugation by the Avars. While the ancestry of these groups remains a subject of ongoing debates, their ranks in all likelihood included the former subjects of the Gepidic and Langobard kingdoms.[13] The archaeological legacy of yet another group, which probably arrived to the south-easterly areas of the Tisza region from the Eastern European steppe at roughly the same time as the Avars and most likely together with them, has been identified in the areas south of the Körös rivers where this stockbreeding population had initially settled (*Fig. 10*). Smaller

communities of this population appeared in Transdanubia during the seventh century (*Fig. 11*).[14] The Avars settled various groups generally lumped together as Slavs in the written sources along the borders of their empire.[15] The archaeological legacy of the Avars who exercised political control and who had no doubt been joined by various other populations during the long trek to their new homeland can be found in various regions across the Carpathian Basin. Even if the exact date of their appearance in particular regions remains controversial, there can be no doubt about their presence in the Danube-Tisza interfluve, in several Transdanubian cemeteries, and on the Little Hungarian Plain.[16]

Thus, we are now able to add increasingly more hues to the broad image of the culturally colourful world of the late sixth- and seventh-century Carpathian Basin under the Avar rule. Previously, specialists engaged in the study of this period tended to speak of the Avars of the Carpathian Basin. Today, the emphasis is on the region's different population groups during the Avar period, highlighting thereby that the Carpathian Basin was populated by many different communities with diverse ancestries and cultures, speaking different tongues. It is evident from the written sources that the Avars, relatively few in number, found a rather sizeable population upon their arrival to the region they drew under their political control and that neither their flight, nor their massacre would have served the conquerors' interest (even if the greater part of the Langobards had opted to depart to Italy). To the contrary: the rulers of the Inner Asian stockbreeding pastoral peoples resembling the Avars strove to draw as many communities as possible under their sway, irrespective of their tongue, ancestry, and lifeways—in their eyes, the principal yardstick of a ruler's power was the multitude of obedient subjects. It is more than telling that Kutlug, founder of the Second Türk Empire in the 680s, who already bore the propagandistic name of "possessing *qut*" ("charismatic"), styled himself as Elterish (r. 682–691), meaning "gatherer of peoples" or "gatherer of power", after

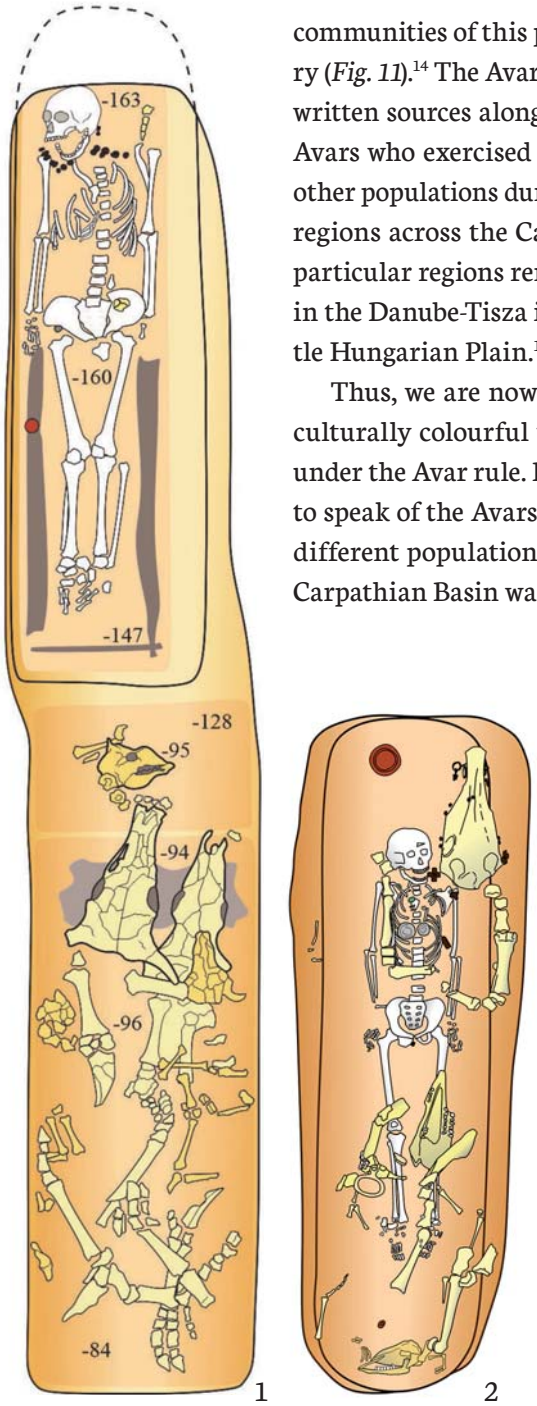

Fig. 10. Two typical burials of the Early Avar-period population with Eastern European traditions in the Tisza region.
1. Kövegy-Nagy földek, Grave 24. 2. Szegvár-Oromdűlő, Grave 1

ascending the throne.[17] The inscriptions erected by his later successors, Bilge khagan (r. 716–734) and Kül tegin in the early 730s reflect this attitude filtered through the ideology of the ruling lineage, according to which the essential precondition to the very existence of a people uniting various kinship groups is that it should have its own khagan whose might and power is acknowledged by the other peoples ("people" is expressed by the term *bodun*, "power" by *el* in the inscriptions). The khagan first had to make the heads of the other kinship groups accept and defer to his power, and then extend his rule over as many peoples as possible—a goal usually achieved through war, which eventually led to the birth of his empire (*el*) through the acquiescence of countless peoples.[18]

The peoples of the Carpathian Basin and the Eastern Roman world before and after 567

Studies on the population groups of the Early Avar period have convincingly demonstrated that irrespective of their settlement territories and cultural background, most communities maintained some contact with the Mediterranean world. The written sources and the archaeological record similarly attest to the connections of the mainly Turkic-speaking pastoral peoples engaged in stockbreeding on the Eastern European steppe and of the Gepids and Langobards of the Carpathian Basin with Eastern Roman lands well before the arrival of the Avars to Europe. The peoples living north of the Empire's frontier, lumped together as Slavs in the sources, similarly had decades-long connections with the Eastern Roman world. These connections, with their various economic, commercial, political, and diplomatic aspects—that could equally lead to military cooperation and hostilities—were conducted through many different channels. The gifts received by the envoys and sent to their rulers during diplomatic missions, the various articles bought by the envoys in foreign lands, the booty taken

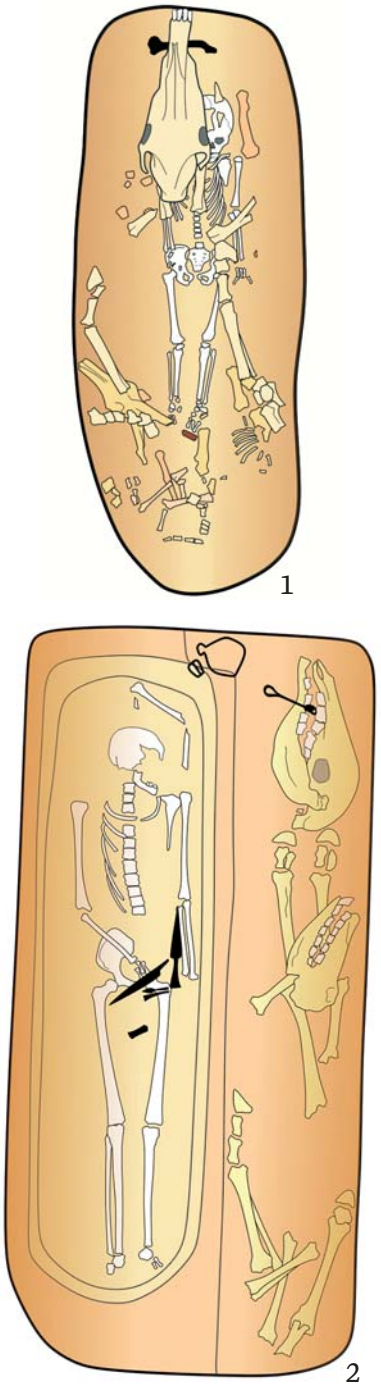

Fig. 11. Two typical burials of the Early Avar-period population with Eastern European traditions in Transdanubia.
1. Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery B, Grave 87. 2. Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út, Grave 335

back to their homeland by the warriors, and the wares peddled by merchants travelling to distant lands were all means whereby these goods reached the Carpathian Basin.

The archaeological finds offer but a fragmented view of these connections. Firstly, we should bear in mind that our main source is made up of the archaeological relics that have principally been recovered from the burials of the Carpathian Basin, and thus anything that was not deposited in the graves has been largely lost to us. The same holds true for the artefacts that have disintegrated during the centuries owing to the region's climatic conditions. The most painful losses are the precious textiles and furniture carved from wood. Very often, our conclusions are based on modest jewellery items and costume accessories of relatively little value such as belt fittings that in most cases reveal little about the most important or highest level of the one-time connections. Quite often, we have no way of knowing how, through which channels, the surviving finds actually reached their final owner.

The set of gaming pieces (*Fig. 12*) recovered from the burial of a high-ranking man, a member of the Langobard community ruling over Transdanubia before the Avar conquest, who was interred shortly before, or perhaps not long after, the arrival of the Avars, illustrates the difficulties in interpreting finds of this kind as well as the many feasible explanations. The elephant ivory raw material of the gaming pieces as well as the similar finds known from Western Europe and Italy clearly indicate that they had not been made locally. It seems likely that they were the products of an Italian workshop and they could have reached the Carpathian Basin in one of several ways: they could have been gifts from an Ostrogothic or Byzantine diplomatic mission presented to one of the Langobard leaders before 568, but they could equally well have been sent by a Western European noble who had earlier acquired the set in Italy. If the set of gaming pieces had been deposited in the burial after the Avar conquest, it may have been received from one of the Langobard leaders who had departed to Italy and gifted the set to one of his diplomatic partners remaining in Pannonia. Procopius records that Langobard troops had fought in Justinian's army in the campaign launched in the 550s against the Ostrogoths controlling northern Italy, and thus another feasible interpretation is that the set had been purchased by one of the Langobard warriors partaking in the campaign or that he had acquired it as part of the booty. We could also speculate whether the set had been used for playing a board game of the type popular among the Germanic peoples,[19] or whether our warrior had learnt a new game when whiling away time with the other soldiers in a Byzantine military camp and had then returned from the Italian war with the accessories of the new game.

Obviously, there is no ready answer to which of the above options was actually the case. Nevertheless, the above stocktaking was not a futile exercise because it highlights the nature of the uncertainties as well as the diversity and complexity of the one-time connections. Several similar issues will be addressed in later chapters. One indisputable difference between the period preceding the Avar conquest and the Early and the Middle Avar period is the intensity of the cultural impact of the Mediterranean world on the material culture of the communities inhabiting the Carpathian Basin. No matter that the written sources make several references to the regular contacts between the lords of Constantinople and the Gepids reigning over the eastern half of the Carpathian Basin from the fifth century onward, similarly as with the Langobards establishing themselves in

Fig. 12. Set of elephant ivory gaming pieces from Grave 12 of the Mosonszentjános cemetery, Hanság Museum, Mosonmagyaróvár

Transdanubia from the early sixth century, the proportion of Mediterranean elements in the archaeological legacy of the former, while not negligible, is hardly of outstanding significance, and the same holds even more true for the Langobard material record of the initial two thirds of the sixth century: very few products made in the Eastern Roman cultural sphere were deposited in their burials.

The Avar Khaganate on the northern frontier of the Eastern Roman Empire

As already mentioned in the foregoing, the arrival of the Avars brought a profound change to the region. One intriguing issue is why the population of the Carpathian Basin had a greater predilection for various articles produced in the Eastern Roman world and Italy[20] during the first century of Avar rule than in the preceding period? Several explanations have been proposed, one of which is that according to the written sources, an immense amount of gold and valuable commodities arrived from the Eastern Roman Empire between 567 and 626, in part received as gifts on the occasion of peace settlements, and in part as subsidies/tribute in the hope of avoiding war, which exceeded by far the "gifts" reaching the Gepids and Langobards and thus had a much greater impact. Another is that the differences in the attitude to products originating from Mediterranean cultures can be sought in the mentality of the Gepidic and Langobard communities engaged in arable farming and of the nomadic Avars who had moved to East Central Europe from the eastern steppe. As we shall see, the two do not exclude each other.

Disregarding the latter, most contentions were based on assessments of the distribution of the artefacts in question and the social status of the deceased from whose burials they had been recovered. Far less attention was accorded to the question of how the products of the Mediterranean found their way to the Carpathian Basin, even though their route would be at least as interesting both in the physical and the cultural sense. It therefore seems prudent to expand our view—which principally scrutinised the material imprints of Avar-Eastern Roman connections from an Avar perspective—and to also look at the Roman side. In order to do so, a less conventional approach has been chosen in the present book: readers are invited on a tour based on the accounts of Byzantine authors and the period's surviving monuments. Travelling down the one-time roads, strolling through the cities and built interior spaces, we can conjure up what the Avars saw and experienced once they crossed into the Empire, either as envoys, warriors, or merchants, and gain an idea of what they saw and felt as well as of their reactions. Let us begin our tour from the Caucasus region, where the envoys of the westward migrating Avars first encountered the Eastern Roman administration.

The Beginning of Avar-Eastern Roman Diplomatic Relations

From the Caucasus to Constantinople

Fig. 13. Solidus bearing the portrait of Maurice minted during the emperor's reign, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Modern readers might be surprised to learn that the contemporaries who had personally witnessed and described the first Avar diplomatic mission to Constantinople, namely Agathias, Malalas, and John of Ephesus, virtually found nothing worthy of recording save for the envoys' looks, possibly because there was nothing to suggest that the newcomers would soon play a decisive role in the Empire's life. We must therefore turn to Menander Protector, writing many decades after the event, for additional details. The late antique historian, who enjoyed the patronage of the Emperor Maurice (r. 582–602; *Fig. 13*), offers a much more detailed account than his predecessors on the appearance of the Avars in the Caucasus and their first embassy to Byzantium. According to his report, the Avars, these sons of the east,

> "after many wanderings [...] came to the Alans and begged Sarosius, the leader of the Alans, that he bring them to the attention of the Romans. Sarosius informed Germanus' son Justin, who at that time was general of the forces in Lazica, about the Avars, Justin told Justinian, and the Emperor ordered the general to send the embassy of the tribe to Byzantium. One Kandikh by name was chosen to be the first envoy from the Avars, and when he came to the palace he told the Emperor of the arrival of the greatest and most powerful of the tribes. The Avars were invincible and could easily crush and destroy all who stood in their path. 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. Thus spoke Kandikh to the Emperor." [21]

Knowing that Menander had access to the records kept in the imperial archives, we have no reason to doubt that he was well informed; nevertheless, some elements of his narrative must definitely be treated with caution. No matter that his report was based on archival sources, his words were penned at a time when the wars fought with the Avars meant a grave threat to the Empire's Balkanic lands. It is quite feasible that Kandikh's threatening

tone and his demand of "yearly payments" and "fertile land" made the Avar envoy's requests an echo of the state of affairs in later years. In other respects, however, the gist of Menander's description seems reliable enough. Although Menander rewrote the envoys' speech culled from his sources in accordance with the principles of antique rhetorics, his descriptions faithfully mirror the information he drew from his documents.[22] There is no reason to doubt, for example, that the Avars first established contact with officers of the Byzantine army representing the Empire's might and power in the Caucasus or that their envoys travelled to Constantinople with the latters' help. It is equally feasible that the Avar envoy had indeed emphasised the prowess and formidable military strength of his people and how the Avars could effectively serve the Empire's interests, knowing full well that if he succeeded, he would enjoy a favourable bargaining position. This fits in perfectly with what we know about the scenarios of the period's diplomatic encounters.

Fig. 14. Gold saddle mount, unprovenanced, from Byzantine territory (perhaps Asia Minor), Archäologische Staatssammlung, München

Even more interesting is the demand for "the most valuable gifts" mentioned by Menander. Although it may well be argued that Kandikh's aggressive tone again reflects the realities of a later age rather than the situation at the time of the first embassy, there can be no doubt that the Avar envoys could rightly expect precious gifts for their masters who had despatched them, which they then duly received. Ritualised gift exchanges between rulers sending embassies to each other and showering the envoys with gifts were part and parcel of late antique diplomatic relations.[23] John of Ephesus, a contemporary less hostile to the Avars than Menander, recounts that the Emperor Justininan presented Kandikh and his fellow-envoys with "rich presents of gold and silver and dresses and girdles and saddles [or perhaps saddle-cloths] ornamented with gold; and sent also similar presents by their hands to their chiefs."[24]

While there can be little doubt about the "gold" given to the envoys, the dresses, belts, and gold-ornamented saddles mentioned in the text remain a matter of speculation. Speaking of gold, the solidus of Justinian I recovered from the Kunágota burial immediately springs to mind (*Fig. 8.2*), which, although deposited a century later, is still one of the few gold coins issued by this emperor found in the Avar Khaganate (even if it remains a matter of controversy when, how, and by whom this Byzantine coin had been acquired).[25] The golden saddle adornments are a thornier issue: although a handful of articles of this type made in the Empire are known (*Fig. 14*), these did not come to light in the Avar lands and most of them date from a slightly later period than Kandikh's visit to Constantinople.[26] We are only slightly better off regarding the belts given to the Avar envoys. As we shall see, even though belt fittings made in Byzantium or in the Byzantine style are known in the sixth- and seventh-century archaeological record of the Carpathian Basin, these hardly include any sixth-century pieces that could be regarded as having been diplomatic gifts. Neither does John of Ephesus provide any more clues, for he makes no mention of whether we should think of two-part belts made up of a buckle and a strap-end of the type worn by the court officials of the imperial palace (*Fig. 15*), or of belts with several side-straps studded with ornate metal mounts that became fashionable in Justinian's age (*Fig. 16*). The latter type is generally associated with the military in the later sixth-century Eastern Roman territories.[27] Yet, we also know that the dress worn by various officials in Late Antiquity was often inspired by military costume and it is therefore possible that this military belt type had been part of the dress worn by certain officials during the mid-sixth century. The counterparts of this belt type appearing on the Central and Eastern European fringes of the Empire from the middle third of the sixth century onward clearly indicate that this costume accessory and its decorative style had made its way to Byzantium's neighbours quite swiftly.

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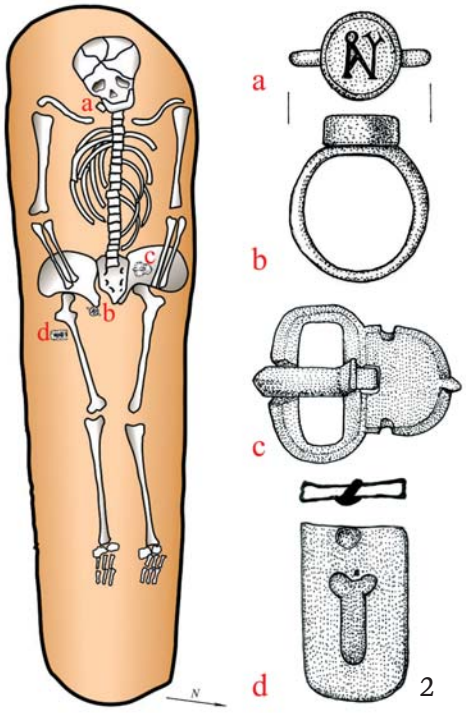

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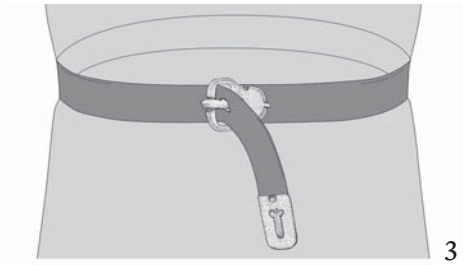

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Fig. 15. Two-part belts of the Eastern Roman type from the sixth century.
1. Depiction of a two-part belt on a mosaic dating from the later sixth century, Kissufim, Israel, Israel Antiquities Authority, Jerusalem.
2. Buckle and strap-end of a two-part belt dated by a solidus of Justinian among the artefacts of Grave 132, Callatis, Romania.
3. Reconstruction of the belt from Callatis

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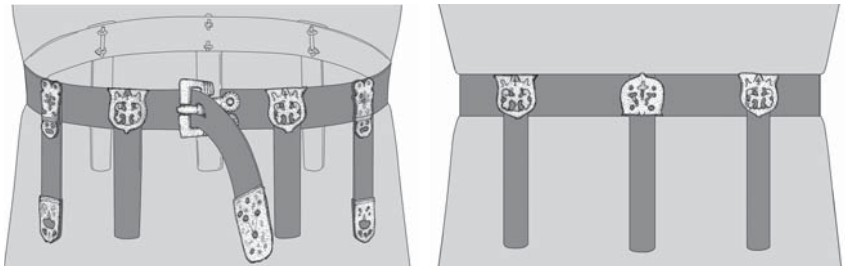

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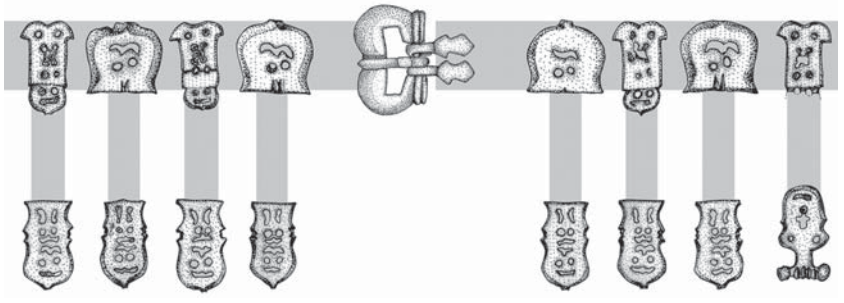

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Fig. 16. Eastern Roman and Eastern Roman-type belts with multiple side-straps from the later sixth century. 1. Depiction of a belt with multiple side-straps on a mosaic dating from the later sixth century, Kissufim, Israel, Israel Antiquities Authority, Jerusalem. 2. Luchistoe, Tomb 212, Crimea. 3. Luchistoe, Tomb 74, Crimea

My enemy's enemy...

The exact sequence of the Eastern Roman response to the first Avar embassy travelling to Constantinople remains vague. The main reason for this is that Menander's *History*, our main source, has only survived in the form of excerpts that were incorporated into a work compiled in the court of the Emperor Constantine VII (r. 912–959). Knowing the usual method employed by the excerptors,[28] we may reasonably assume that the delegation led by Valentinus, which travelled to the steppean homeland of the Avars in the late 550s, mentioned in another excerpt from Menander's work, was a response to Kandikh's embassy. This also seems likely in view of the late antique practice of "block diplomacy",[29] and it seems quite certain that the Byzantine emperor had not relayed the most important portion of his reply to the Avar khagan through Kandikh and the envoys accompanying him, but had despatched his own envoys in response to the khagan, who perhaps accompanied Kandikh on his way back. Whichever the case, Justinian sent off Valentinus and his retinue to the Avars with a specific offer that they should move against the pastoral stockbreeding peoples—the Utigurs, Kutrigurs, and Sabirs—living on the northern coast of the Black Sea and in the Caucasian foreland, in part probably in response to the Kutrigur advance as far as Constantinople in 558–559. To sweeten the deal and to promote the hoped-for alliance, the emperor showered his newly-found friends with a lavish array of gifts, sending them "cords worked with gold, couches, silken garments and a great many other objects" (*Fig. 17*).[30]

The hoped-for blow was not long in coming: the Avars swiftly crushed the nomadic tribes who had earlier threatened the Empire's Caucasian, Crimean, and northern Balkanic lands as well as her allies. The leaders of the vanquished peoples were forced to bow to the khagan's supremacy, conforming to the centuries-long tradition of the steppe. In this particular case, however, more was involved for some steppean communities than the customary nominal acceptance of the khagan's overlordship. Agathias, one of the Constantinopolitan contemporaries, offers a vivid account—even if with a pinch of exaggeration—of the fate of the Utigurs and Kutrigurs, who were first played off against each other through the skilful intrigues of imperial diplomacy and then defeated by the Avars: "they have so weakened themselves and their numbers have become so seriously depleted that they have lost their national identity. The scattered remnant of these Hunnic tribes has in fact been reduced to servitude in the lands of other peoples whose names they have assumed".[31] Indeed, the name of the Kutrigurs, appearing in the sources for no more than a few decades, disappears altogether after 567. There is a consensus in archaeological scholarship that some of the Eastern European peoples subdued by force of arms were transplanted to the south-easterly areas of the Tisza region, which, after the victory over the Gepids, fell under the direct political authority of the khagan, the "gatherer of peoples".[32] The relatively tight political control over the Kutrigurs is reflected in the threats hurled by Bayan, the Avar khagan, at the Eastern Roman defenders of Sirmium during the city's first siege, cited in Menander's rhetorical account, which is also the very last mention of the Kutrigurs in the sources: "'I shall send against the Roman lands those who, if they happen to be destroyed, shall cause me no pain.' He ordered ten thousand of the so-called Kutrigur Huns to cross the river Save and devastate the land towards Dalmatia."[33]

Other groups previously subjugated by Bayan's forces remained on the Eastern European steppe. A few years after the defeat suffered at the hands of the Avars, the Ogur tribes living west of the Volga and in the Caucasian foreland came under the rule of the Türks who had appeared in the region in 567.[34] It is uncertain how far westward this Western Türk authority extended (*Fig. 18*). What we do know is that in 576, the army sent by the Western Türk ruler, whose ranks included Utigur troops, successfully besieged the city of Bosporos (modern Kerch) and that three years later they had pitched their tents under the walls of Cherson.[35] It therefore seems likely that the Türks' sphere of influence extended at least as far as the Dnieper, explaining why the Avars of the Carpathian Basin still felt threatened by the Türks in the late 570s and the earlier 580s.[36] Yet, within two decades, hardly independently of the internal strife among the Türks

1

2

Fig. 17. Eastern Roman silks from the sixth and seventh centuries. 1. Saint Theodore wearing a silk cloak, sixth century, Church of Santi Cosma e Damiano, Rome. 2. Silk finds from Grave 249 of the Antinoopolis B cemetery, Middle Egypt, late fifth to early seventh century, Musée des Tissus, Lyon

in the 590s,[37] events took a new turn. In the wake of the Avar campaign launched from the Carpathian Basin to the east in 602–603, the Ogur tribes living on the steppe in the Dniester and Dnieper region—whose more westerly groups had probably been the subjects of the Avar khagan in earlier times, too[38]—were now again drawn more closely into the Avar sphere of influence.[39] Even as late as the 630s, Kuvrat, the Bulgar ruler, had to win his independence from the Avar khagan,[40] an indication that the Avars' authority, no matter how nominal in some cases, extended to the Eastern European steppe even when they had already established themselves in the Carpathian Basin. During much of this period, the Ogur communities of the steppe were integrated into the alliance system of the period's major powers, alternately as outer clients of the Avars and the Türks.[41]

Fig. 18. Steppean empires in the later sixth and earlier seventh centuries: the First Türk Khaganate, the Avar Khaganate, and Kuvrat's Magna Bolgaria and their spheres of influence

From friend to foe

Less than a few years after the diplomatic missions led by Kandikh and Valentinus, the Constantinopolitan administration had to face the grave consequences of its earlier alliance policy. After vanquishing the peoples of the Eastern European steppe as allies of Byzantium, the Avars rose to become the overlords of the peoples who had earlier led campaigns against the Empire, and had grown from useful allies into annoying and burdensome neighbours. Some five years after their first appearance in Constantinople, the Avars were encamped in the Lower Danube region and, perhaps as part of the alliance concluded a few years earlier, they turned to the emperor, requesting him to grant them fertile lands where they could settle. The khagan despatched a new delegation to Constantinople—at least the second within half a decade—to negotiate the details and to ensure that his wish would be granted. The records seen by Menander only mention the name of the Byzantine military commander, a certain Justin, who saw the envoys off to the imperial capital, but do not record the name of the delegation's leader. Menander relates that one member of the delegation was called Kunimon, who, judging from his German-sounding name, had perhaps entered the khagan's service from among the inhabitants of the freshly conquered Eastern European region.[42]

"Foreigners" like Kunimon often played a crucial role in Eastern Roman-barbarian diplomatic contacts. Regardless of whether they joined the camp of their new overlords of their own free will or were recruited from among the ranks of—often enslaved—captives, their knowledge of one or more foreign tongues as well as their familiarity with Roman cultural norms and habits ensured their importance as members of diplomatic delegations. The same considerations motivated the lords of Constantinople to employ "foreigners" as interpreters in diplomatic affairs.[43] Although Menander has little to say about Kunimon, it seems likely that few among the Avars who had appeared but a few years earlier in the Eastern European region spoke Greek, the language of communication with the Byzantines. Even though many Turkic-speaking sons of the Eastern European steppe undoubtedly served as interpreters to the imperial court,[44] the khagan had good reason to send his own trusted people with the delegation since this would ensure not only a smooth run of affairs, but also that his partner did not gain the upper hand during the negotiations by means of his own interpreters. At the same time, there was some danger in employing "foreigners", as shown by the following incident.

Irrespective of whether Kunimon threw in his lot with the Avars of his own free will or was a prisoner/slave, he obviously had one eye on his own good fortune rather than on furthering the plans of his new masters. Apparently, Justin had "befriended" Kunimon, who had no scruples about informing his new friend about the Avars' secret plan to occupy certain territories of the Empire by force of their weapons. Menander discreetly remains silent on the number of solidi that had secured the treacherous envoy's friendship, mentioning only that in contrast to his goodwill on previous occasions, the emperor, after being informed of the Avars' intentions, was quite understandably less inclined to show any signs of cooperation or generosity. Consequently, as Menander relates, the Avar envoys "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."[45] This again goes to show that ritualised gift exchanges and bestowing gifts on the envoys were staple elements of diplomatic exchanges—regardless of whether or not the mission was successful, and even in cases when one or even both parties were fully aware that the negotiations would not be reassuringly concluded, gift-giving could not be forsworn.

In the grip of a many-fronted war

Viewing the events with hindsight, Menander believed that the Avars' successful expansion was a direct consequence of Justinian's misbegotten military and diplomatic policy as well as his miscalculation of the overall situation.[46] However, the emperor was motivated by a realistic assessment of the options open to him when he entered into alliance with the Avars. His ultimate goal was to ease the pressure on the Empire's northern frontier by seeking allies against the barbarians hostile to the Empire. This policy could be justified on several counts. Although the resistance put up by the Italian Goths was crushed by the early 550s, maintaining order in the Italian region still tied down major forces. The decades-long war between the Gepids and Langobards of the Carpathian Basin, calling for constant Byzantine intervention, inevitably gave cause for unrest along the northern frontier. Despite the imperial policy of keeping a watchful eye on the Balkans, the situation along the Lower Danubian frontier remained an unresolved problem owing to the recurring incursions of the Slavs and Kutrigurs. The arrival of the Avars provided a solution, even if only a temporary one, for the immediate threat posed by the Kutrigurs, who launched their last attack against the eastern Balkans in 558–559.[47] The lords of the Byzantine Empire had gained ample experience during the century that had elapsed since the passing of the Hunnic threat in how to play off the tribes living along the frontiers against each other in order to maintain a delicate balance, and it seemed an obvious choice to use the Avars as a counterbalance. Neither was the reorganisation of the frontier defences by means of external resources alien to Justinian's administration, an option that had already been employed in the Near East in the 530s. Thus, setting her sight on the re-conquest of the former Western Roman territories—North Africa under Vandal rule and Gothic Italy—instead of expending troops and arms on reinforcing the fort system of the Arabian frontier (*limes Arabicus*) extending through Syria and Jordan, Constantinople chose to entrust the defence of the eastern frontier largely to the Arabic tribes allied to Byzantium.[48]

Yet, the Constantinopolitan court could hardly have been aware of two factors in the case of the Avars. Firstly, they had no way of knowing that Bayan, the lord of the Avars, was a charismatic leader of the type appearing time and again in the history of the steppe, who led his people from victory to victory by virtue of his military acumen, his good luck, and his personal qualities. Secondly, until 563, they were ostensibly unaware of the fact that the appearance of the Avars in Eastern Europe was precipitated by the rise of the Türk Khaganate, a power so great that the Avars still felt threatened by it even after they had put several thousand kilometres between

them (*Fig. 18*). While Byzantium would soon realize the former through her own bitter experiences, they learnt of the latter from one of the embassies sent to Constantinople by one of the tribal leaders under Western Türk rule, who apparently recounted the reason for the Avars' flight and their migration to Europe in the face of the growing Türk power. The envoys also made it clear that, similarly to the fifth-century Rouran and the thirteenth-century Mongols, the Türks would not tolerate the "flight" of their subjects and were preparing to march against them, and now hoped to enlist their Roman partners as allies.[49] However, the newly acquired knowledge of the Avars' flight was not capitalised on by Justinian, but by his successor, Justin II (r. 565–578; *Fig. 19*) who believed the time had come to take a firm hand against the increasingly troublesome new ally as well as against many of the Empire's other neighbours.

Fig. 19. Gold tremissis bearing the portrait of Justin II minted during the emperor's reign from Grave 2 of Szentendre, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

The outbreak of open hostilities

As was customary, as soon as Justin took the purple, the imperial administration officially notified the Empire's diplomatic partners about the change on the throne. In addition to the announcement of the new negotiating partner, the other main tasks of the delegations included the confirmation or modification of earlier agreements, or their annulment if deemed necessary.[50] Obviously, modifications to earlier agreements could be initiated by both sides.

Following the conclusion of the campaigns for reconquering the Western Roman territories and in view of the headaches caused by the frontier defence entrusted to external allies, Justin apparently set his mind on overhauling the system of annual subsidies and gifts that were regularly sent to various peoples for ensuring peace on the frontier. Or so it would seem from the situation greeting the Eastern Roman envoys sent to Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital for announcing Justin's ascension, who learnt that the leaders of the Arab tribes residing in the frontier zone between the two empires had lodged a complaint to the Persian ruler (*Fig. 20*) that the new emperor had refused to send the subsidies they had formerly received from Justinian. Justin II's envoys retorted that agreements on subsidies were in force only during the lifetime of the ruler by whom they had been signed and, accordingly, the agreement's validity expired upon the emperor's death.[51]

It is possible that Justin II sent a similar message to the Avar khagan or, conversely, that the Avars felt that the time was ripe for extorting higher payments than they had received until then from their new neighbour.[52] The documents consulted by Menander recorded that the Avar envoys, among them a certain Tergazis, sent to

the new Eastern Roman emperor to convey their master's congratulations and good wishes had also been instructed to enter into negotiations about the terms of the agreements concluded under Justinian.

The poet Flavius Cresconius Corippus, attached to the imperial court at the time, described the conduct of the Avar envoys at their reception by the emperor as follows:

> "the harsh and cruel Avar began thus with sharp words: 'The Cagan, the king of the Avars, fighting wars in the furthest parts of the earth has laid low by his great strength famous tyrants, and has subdued innumerable peoples and strong kingdoms. [...] The savage Persians were afraid of him, they put their hands to his knees as he threatened them and earned peace with their prayers. [...] We have broken the Euphrates, and subdued icy rivers and wintry snows [...]. We joined battle, we captured fortified cities and cast

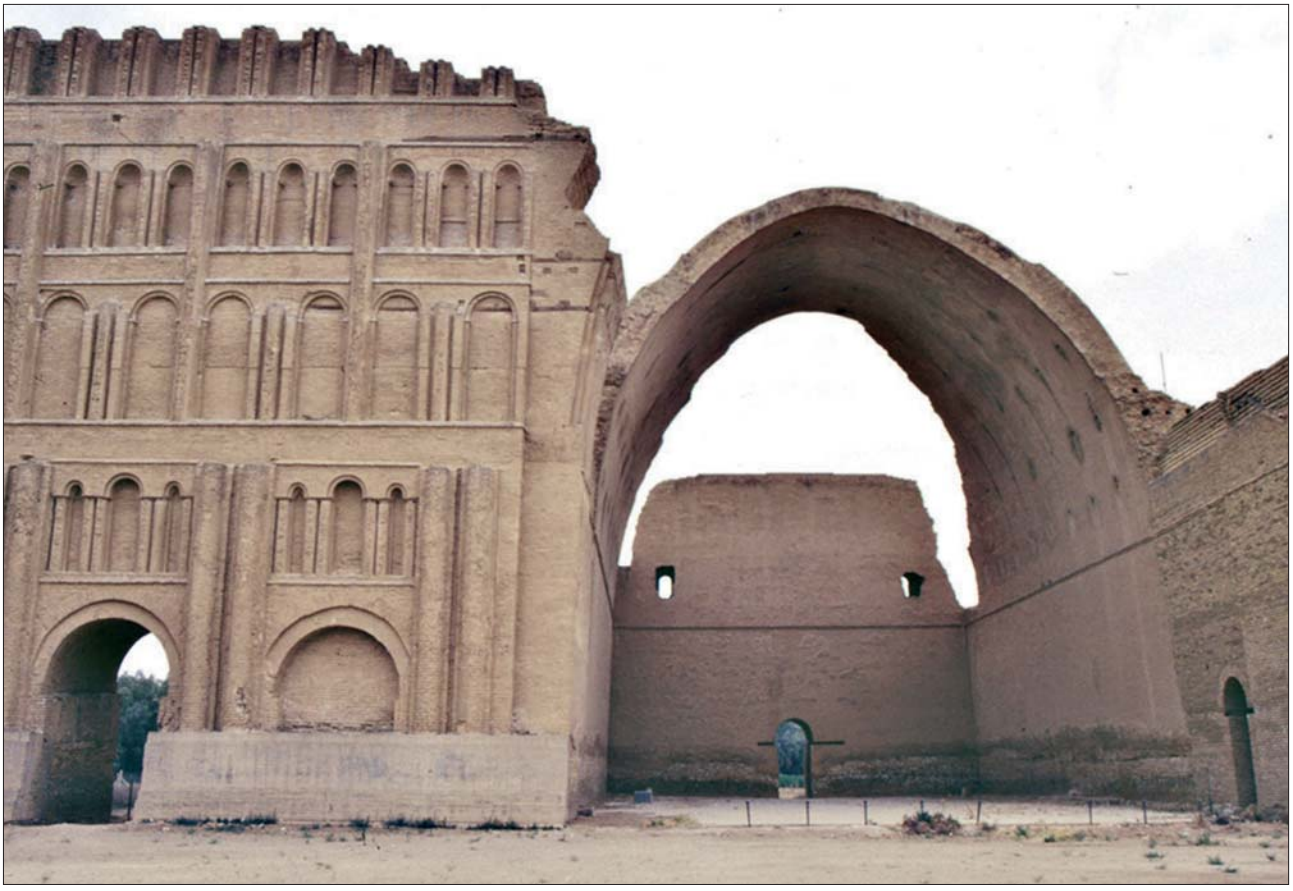


Fig. 20. Ṭāq-i Kisrā (today in Iraq): the single still extant architectural remain, probably the one-time throne room, of the palace of the Persian ruler in Ctesiphon

> down strong towns by tearing down their walls. And now our king has come as a conqueror to the banks of the Scythian Hister, and fixing his numerous tents over the wide plains he has sent us, emperor, to this splendid city of yours. 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 agreement stand, you will send our king the gifts that are his due.'"[53]

No matter that Corippus's text is laced with antique literary tropes and poetic flourishes exaggerating the Avars' churlishness, it nevertheless preserves an imprint of the period's array of diplomatic strategies: an over-accentuated self-confidence and barely veiled threats intended to intimidate were among the usual tools of the period's diplomatic dealings. Still, at this particular moment in 565, the Avar delegation's success in what they could wangle from the emperor was significantly more important for the Avars than other ordinary cases of confirming already existing alliances. The issue of their new homeland was still unresolved and neither could the Avar leaders, ruling over a host of subdued peoples, afford to lose the "yearly solace".

Writing of the "usual gifts", Menander also records that the Avars had received "cords worked with gold which were made to confine what was escaping and likewise couches and other luxury goods." He was aware of the earlier agreements and the intention to confirm the existing alliance. While his account is similar to Corippus's, he evokes the Avars' negotiating strategy and the dilemma faced by the imperial administration at greater length:

> "It is right, O Emperor, that, inheriting your father's sovereignty, you should bring benefits to his friends just as your father did and that, by emending nothing of what he did when alive, you should show yourself truly his successor now he is dead. [...] When your father lavished gifts upon us, we paid him back both by not invading Roman territory, though we are able to do so, and by performing still more. For we destroyed wholesale the neighbouring barbarians who were continually ravaging Thrace, and none at all of those who survive overrun the borders of the Thracians, since they fear the might of the Avars which is friendly to the Roman Empire. We, therefore, believe that the only innovation which you will make towards us will be to pay us more than your father did [...]. For you must be aware that our leader cannot be a good friend of yours and of the Roman state unless he first receive that for which he forebore to attack the Romans."

Menander saw quite clearly that the Avars' intent was none other than to "frighten and intimidate the Emperor, and as a result the Romans would be compelled to pay tribute to the Avars."[54]

The envoys' words alluding to the greatness of his people, their invincibility, and the might of their weapons failed to elicit the desired effect. The appearance of the Avars in the Lower Danube region and their demands for land where they could settle threatened the very territorial integrity of the Empire, which called for an entirely different stance by the Byzantine administration than the one embraced by Justinian towards a useful, but distant ally. Befitting the new situation, Justin II rebuffed the envoys boasting of the might of their people:

> "Just as legates are given licence to speak, so they should be humble in mind and sober in the uprightness of their lives; they should be men who can know in due order when they should speak humbly and when in pride, and who will seek that which will mitigate our wrath, and who will take care for their own lives when demanding a treaty. [...] Why do you praise fugitives and extol an exiled people with empty glory? The bold Avar race, which you say subdued strong kingdoms, could not defend its own lands and left its home as a fugitive. [...] 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? [...]. We go to war."[55]

The emperor's arguments cited by Corippus were a well-deserved rejoinder to the threats of the haughty envoys. The protection accorded to the members of diplomatic missions[56]—what we would call diplomatic immunity today ("legates are given licence to speak")—was respected, even if laced with a barely veiled intimation regarding the safety of the envoys' lives. The remark on the "fugitive" status of the Avars, mocked by the emperor of proving incapable of protecting their own land, was a clear allusion to the fact that the Byzantine court was well aware of the reason for the Avars' migration to Europe (after having been informed by the Western Türks two years earlier) and the Eastern Romans did not pass up the opportunity to flaunt this tidbit of information as part of the psychological warfare employed during diplomatic negotiations.

From menacing neighbour to hostile power

Indeed, the weapons alluded to by Tergazis and his fellow envoys as well as by Justin II were soon brandished in earnest. Within a few years, we find Bayan and his Avars encamped under Sirmium (modern Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia), the gateway to the northern Balkans. Their fortunes had taken a turn for the better since their visit to Constantinople in 565: Alboin, king of the Langobards (r. *ca.* 560–572) decided that he could find no better ally for defeating his old enemies, the Gepids, than one who lived far away from the western half of the Carpathian Basin. As it turned out, Alboin had less reason and time to be elated over the victory scored against the Gepids in 567 than the lords of Constantinople over the success of the Avars against the peoples of the Eastern European steppe. The Langobards paid a heavy price for the fruitful strategic alliance by ceding their Pannonian lands: Alboin led his people to Italy, while Bayan and his Avars occupied those regions of the Carpathian Basin that were best suited to their lifestyle. Additionally, the khagan, who had since long craved a land where he could settle, also added new communities to his "collection" of peoples by integrating the former subjects of the vanquished Gepidic and Langobard kingdoms into his own polity, an integration that involved a new division of the territory as well as major shifts in, and a restructuring of, power relations. The majority of the Avars settled in the Danube-Tisza interfluve and on the Little Hungarian Plain, the two regions best suited to their pastoral stockbreeding lifestyle, while smaller groups, following the traditional eastern practice of controlling

the vanquished peoples, made their residence in Transdanubia, a region mainly populated by communities residing in the Carpathian Basin since well before the Avars' arrival (*Fig. 21*). The former Eastern European subjects, similarly made up of communities engaged in pastoral stockbreeding, were given the land south of the Körös rivers once possessed by the Gepids.[57] The burials of the latter are still attested in the Tisza region after the Avar conquest (*Fig. 22*), an indication that some of their communities were permitted to remain in their former homes, while others were in all likelihood settled on land, probably mainly in Transdanubia, that was less suited to the lifestyle of their new overlords. One priority was the disruption of the networks linking the leaders of the previous period with their communities in order to minimise the danger of any resistance to the Avars who were numerically a minority and it seems likely that a part of the old elite was pushed aside. On the lower social levels, they were replaced with new or old-new individuals from the ranks of the subjugated peoples who hoped to reap personal advantages from their position, or were simply willing to collaborate with their new Avar overlords, and who were respected in their own communities. On the uppermost levels, conforming to the

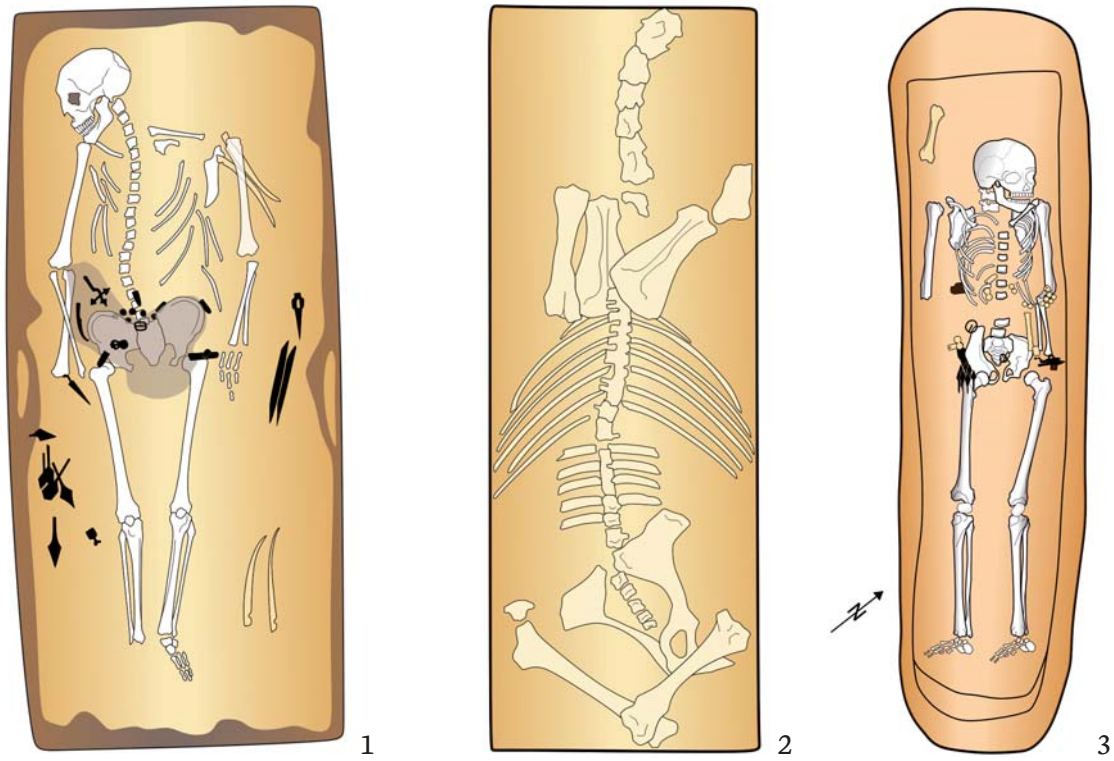
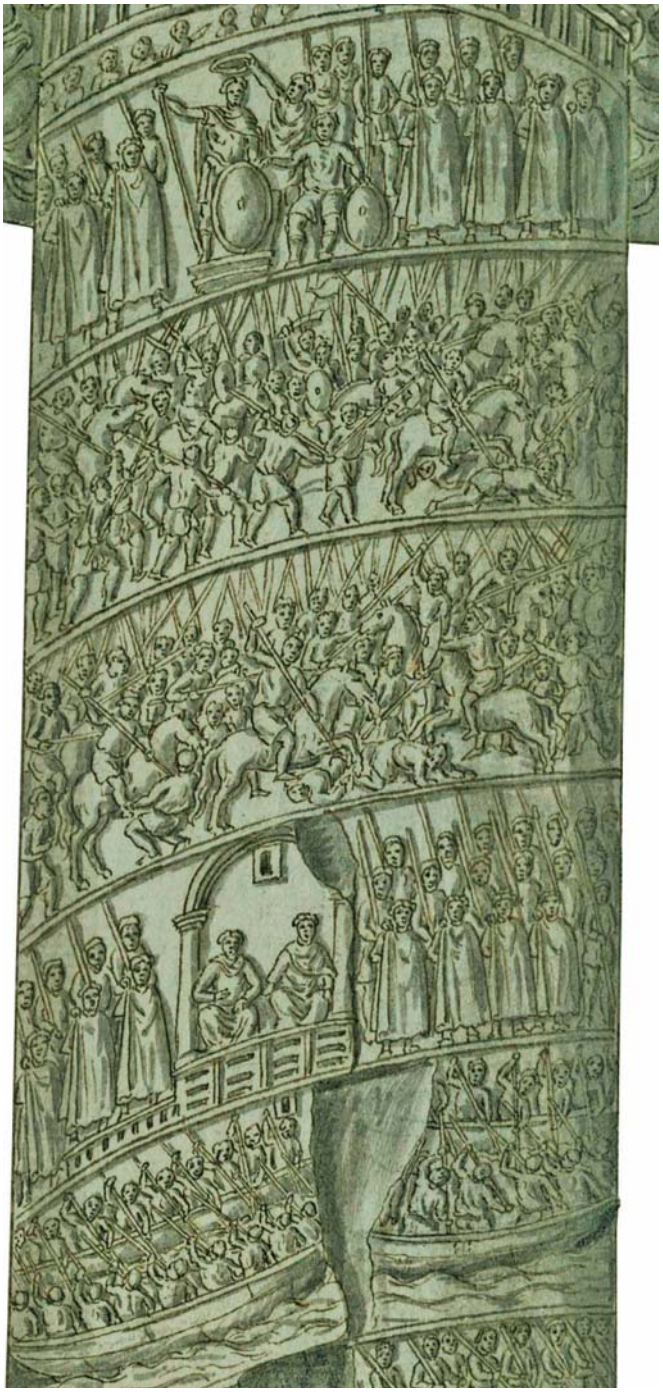


Fig. 21. Early Avar burials from the region west of the Danube. 1-2. Környe, Grave 147, and the associated horse burial, Grave 141. 3. Börcs-Nagydomb, Grave 1

Fig. 22. Gepidic burial of the Avar period in the Tisza region, Szilhalom-Budaszög, Grave 2: grave plan and a selection of the grave goods, Dobó István Castle Museum, Eger

organisation of Eurasian nomadic empires, members of the khagan's kinsfolk or reliable Avars from his entourage were probably selected to lead larger compliant communities. Although this social organisation did have its inherent dangers, the khagan and his entourage could best rely on them to promote his interest and will, since as Jonathan K. Skaff aptly notes, "putting personally loyal clients into position of authority was an essential aspect of consolidating rule on the steppe."[58] The strength of the peoples—Avars, Gepids, Langobards, Slavs, various Oghur tribes, and others—who had earlier been embroiled in bitter fights against each other was now combined in a power machine geared towards the Avar khagan's ambitions, which proved highly effective for furthering his interests against Constantinople. Before exploring this issue at greater length, let us first follow the route taken by the Avar envoys every few years during the one and a half decades before the late 560s to gain an idea of what they saw and experienced in the Eastern Roman lands.



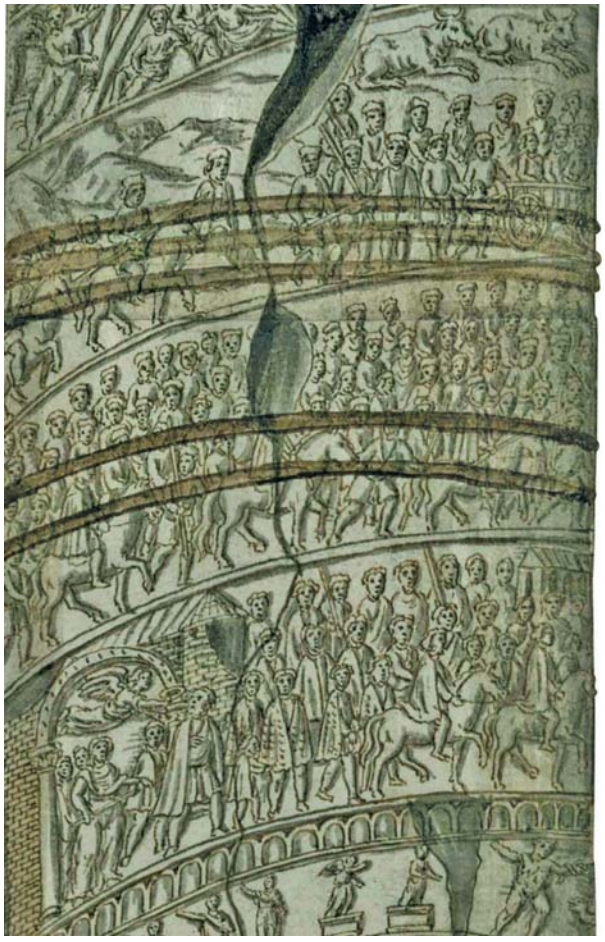


Fig. 23. Details of the sixteenth-century drawing of the one-time Column of Arcadius (sole r. 395–408) erected in Constantinople, as preserved in the Freshfield Album, Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.17.2, fol. 12.
Right: Expulsion of the Goths under Gainas from Constantinople in 400 AD.
Left: The lower panels portray Arcadius and Honorius amidst their soldiers, with images of sea and land battles above and below them. The uppermost panel shows Arcadius standing amidst his soldiers and the triumphal wreath received for the victory over the Goths above his head

Psychological Warfare: The Envoys' Encounter with the Other

Reading the accounts penned by Menander and Corippus, cited at greater length in the foregoing, readers nurtured on modern source criticism can be forgiven for harbouring some doubts as to the reliability of these texts, written and structured in accordance with the norms of antique rhetorics, strongly dramatised and, not least, presenting the events from the perspective of their Roman authors. We must be mindful that these authors related what they had personally witnessed or read in various records as demanded by the period's literary norms and that the dialogues between the envoys and the emperors were recounted in this spirit. Yet, whether as eyewitnesses (like Corippus) or as historians with access to official documents (like Menander), the gist of their account was written in knowledge of what had happened. We should also bear in mind that the envoys sent out by Constantinople were generally learned men who were well versed in the art of classical rhetorics. The arguments put forward by envoys could draw from a rich repository assembled during Greek and Roman times, which had been fully mastered by students of rhetorics.[59]

Even though we can only fall back on the literary texts cited in the foregoing because of the destruction of the imperial archives, a few accounts preserved through a series of fortuitous happenstances offer a relatively accurate reflection of the original documents. One of these is a mid-tenth-century source preserving a slightly revised work covering the period discussed here. The text was based on the documents of, or on the author's personal familiarity with, the visit of the envoys sent by Khusraw I (r. 531–579), the Sasanian Shahanshah ('King of Kings'), to Constantinople in 551 (or 557). The original text was penned by Peter the Patrician, the *magister officiorum* at the time, with the intention of describing the operation of the Eastern Roman state, arranged around the tasks and duties of the office he held. This text is all the more valuable because as *magister officiorum*, Peter was personally responsible for dealing with affairs relating to diplomatic missions and he thus had an excellent personal knowledge of its ins and outs. His compilation of prescriptions was ultimately motivated by practical considerations.[60] The account of the route of the Persian envoys offers an intriguing look behind the scenes in the literary accounts of the Avar embassies.[61]

From the frontier to the Empire's heart

As soon as news of the arrival of a new embassy reached Constantinople, the *magister officiorum* sent a high-ranking official to the Empire's frontier to meet the envoys. He presented a written invitation, a document drawn up in the imperial palace, that served as a kind of passport ensuring the delegation's safe conduct during their sojourn in the Empire. The official met the Persian envoys sent in 551 in Nisibis (modern Nusaybin in Turkey) on the frontier's Persian side. From the moment they crossed the frontier until their return, the envoys travelled with these "guides" who both facilitated and controlled their movement.[62] In addition to ensuring that the envoys would be comfortable and safe, their duties also included the prevention of the envoys from talking freely, without supervision, with the locals, or from seeing certain things during their journey and from gathering information, particularly of the sort not intended for them. As we have seen, the same procedure was followed in the case of the Avars in the Caucasus and the Lower Danube region: when the military commander stationed there was informed of the Avar embassy, he notified Constantinople and only let the envoys pass after the written invitation and the official guide had arrived.

From the moment the envoys set foot in the Empire, the expenses were borne by the receiving state, which took care of accommodation and the nourishment of the delegation. If the embassy was a particularly important one, the central administration could stipulate that the dignitaries of the cities *en route* should provide an appropriate reception and also attend to their entertainment. Depending on the geographical situation, envoys could take a marine or overland route. Whichever they chose, the embassies arriving from the east—either from the Caucasus or Persia—were put ashore in the immediate vicinity of Constantinople. Thus, for example, the last station of the Persian delegation of 551 was Chalcedon (modern Kadiköy, Istanbul), where, within sight of the capital, they rested for a short while before crossing the Bosporus. Here they received the letter of greeting of the *magister officiorum* and the gifts.[63] The Avars and their envoys were ranked below the Persians, one of the superpowers of the ancient world, and the lodgings and provisions they received were probably much less lavish—but even so, there can be no doubt that the Avars who boasted of the might of their weapons to the emperor had ample time to receive a taste of the wealth and power of their negotiating partner well before setting foot in Constantinople.

On the streets of Constantinople

Excepting Antioch and Alexandria, all that the dignitaries of the cities in the Empire's provinces had to offer was but a finely orchestrated prelude to what the envoys would experience in the imperial capital. From the last stop, the envoys arriving from the north-west were led to Constantinople on horseback, while delegations from all other directions were brought to the city by ship (*Fig. 24*).[64] Upon their arrival, they were taken to their lodgings prepared by the *magister officiorum*, where they received another letter of greeting and gifts, followed by a formal exchange

Fig. 24. View of Byzantine Constantinople and the imperial palace from the sea. Conjectural reconstruction: © Tayfun Öner, with the imperial palace complex, the Hippodrome, and the Hagia Sophia in the foreground and the Mese, the city's main thoroughfare leading to the Theodosian Wall, in the background

Fig. 25. The Theodosian Wall and one of its gates, with the less densely built up area between the Constantinian and Theodosian Walls. Conjectural reconstruction: © Tayfun Öner

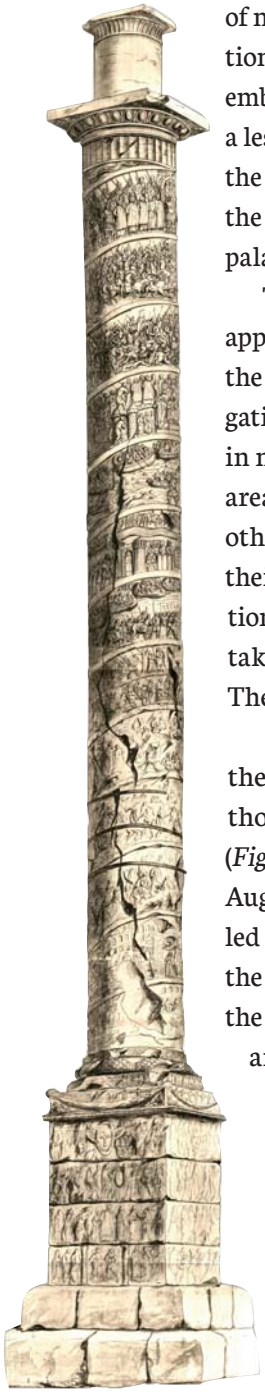


Fig. 26. Seventeenth-century drawing of the one-time Column of Arcadius in Constantinople. Roger de Gaignières Collection, Bibliothèque Nationale de France

of messages between the envoys and the *magister officiorum*. The actual date and time of their reception was decided by the emperor and depended on the political situation and the purpose of the embassy. If, as in the case of Kunimon, it was known beforehand that the delegation had arrived with a less than favourable offer, the imperial administration had no qualms about dragging its feet and the psychological exhaustion of the envoys, but in the end, they were admitted into the presence of the emperor.[65] The envoys then walked down the road with its many sights leading to the imperial palace located on the tip of the promontory extending into the Golden Horn.

The sixth- and seventh-century sources do not reveal where the envoys were lodged. It would appear that unlike in the ninth and tenth centuries, no buildings had been designated to serve as the permanent lodgings for delegations. Instead, the location was selected according to the delegation's rank, size, and the momentarily available resources. Knowing that the embassies arriving in ninth and tenth centuries were lodged in a building that lay in the city's less densely populated area between the Constantinian and Theodosian Walls,[66] it seems quite possible that one or another residence in this quarter was used for similar purposes. Several aristocratic families had their palaces in this area and the administration could from time to time solve the accommodation of the envoys by lodging them in this area in the sixth and seventh centuries, too. The envoys taking an overland route reached this quarter by passing through one of the gates piercing the Theodosian Walls (*Fig. 25*), while those arriving by ship were escorted here from one of the ports.

When travelling to the successive audiences in the imperial palace and upon returning to their lodgings, the envoys repeatedly passed through the city's major hubs. One of the main thoroughfares leading in and out of the city was the southern main road known as the *Mese* (*Fig. 24*) along which the imperial processions were also held. It started out from the Milion on Augustaion Square opposite the Chalke Gate (*Fig. 27*), the main entrance to the Great Palace, and led to the Forum of Constantine the Great with the Constantinian Senate House, whence it ran to the *Tetrapylon*, the forums of Theodosius and Arcadius embellished by the triumphal columns of the emperors resembling the ones erected by Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius in Rome (*Figs 23, 26*), and then left the city through the Golden Gate.[67] A series of other renowned buildings and monuments lined the road. The officials and interpreters sent by the *magister officiorum* to accompany the envoys and their retinue no doubt seized the occasion to point out and explain the history of the monuments testifying to the grandeur and glory of the city and the Empire to their guest while making their way to their destination and to answer any questions about Constantinople, the city's past, and its sights.

Fig. 27. Main entrance area of the Great Palace in Constantinople with the Chalke Gate. Conjectural reconstruction: © Tayfun Öner

In the imperial palace

Upon reaching their destination, the envoys were ushered into the Great Palace (*Fig. 27*). The imperial residence originally built by Constantine the Great (r. 306–337) had evolved into a palace complex made up of smaller and larger palaces and other buildings, and the gardens created in the open spaces between them (*Figs 24, 31*).[68] Together with the Hippodrome to its west, which could be directly accessed from the palace, and the Hagia Sophia to its north, this architectural complex formed the Empire's heart.

Entering the Great Palace, the envoys were doubtless awed by the ornate corridors, halls and gardens (*Fig. 28*), and the statues, wall hangings, ivory carvings, and silver and gold metalwork, again impressing upon them the might, wealth, and glory of the emperor and his empire.[69] Before being admitted into the emperor's presence, the *magister officiorum* received them in one of the halls used by him (the *schola*), where he enquired about the gifts brought by the envoys for the emperor in their ruler's name and then presented a list of the gifts to the emperor. Only then were they led to the doors of the imperial reception hall (the *consistorium*), where they waited for their admittance. After the emperor and the imperial officials attending the reception entered, the emperor took his place on the throne and the others in their appointed place in the hall. Before opening the

Fig. 28. The Peristyle Courtyard and its mosaic floor, one of the archaeologically investigated areas of the Great Palace in Constantinople. Conjectural reconstruction: © Tayfun Öner

doors—or the doors of the open-air summer *consistorium* if the gifts also included horses—the *magister officiorum* announced the envoys to the emperor from a tablet prepared for the occasion.

Before entering the hall after the curtains covering the door were drawn, the envoy threw himself on the floor "where the porphyry marble slab is" (*proskynesis*). This act of obeisance was repeated in the middle of the hall and again at the emperor's feet. Rising to his feet, the envoy then presented the letter sent by his ruler and greeted the emperor. After the emperor returned the good wishes, he enquired about the envoy's ruler; the envoy then requested permission to present the gifts he had brought. After the emperor acceded, the envoy called his men standing by the wall opposite the throne outside the curtain who, bearing the gifts, went up to the emperor (not forgetting to perform the three required acts of obeisance). The gifts were handed over to the *silentarii* and taken to the imperial vestry and treasury (*vestosacra*), where they were checked against the list of gifts received beforehand and valuated. The *magister officiorum* was immediately informed of the valuation, which determined the value of the reciprocal gifts to be presented to the envoys for their ruler. After receiving the gifts, the emperor dismissed the envoys. The imperial officials also left the hall after the envoys' departure. The

magister officiorum took leave of the envoys waiting for him in the *schola*, who were then escorted back to their lodgings.

After reading the letter delivered by the envoys, the emperor would decide when the second audience would be held. The leader of the embassy then presented the gifts he had personally brought for the emperor if he consented. Again, a list was drawn up on the day of the reception, which was shown to the emperor by the *magister officiorum*. The gifts were then presented according to the same procedure as previously as part of the diplomatic negotiations between the envoys and the emperor. After the first two largely ceremonial meetings, the delegation finally had the chance to discuss matters of relevance during the third audience. Following the negotiations with the emperor, the envoys continued their negotiations—with the emperor's permission—with the *magister officiorum* and the officials authorised to do so.[70]

While no other similar account even remotely as exhaustive as the one of the Persian embassy of 551 has survived, important details have been preserved in several literary texts, from which we know that even though the delegations sent by the Persian ruler were treated with exceptional attention and respect in Byzantium, the protocol of receiving embassies was more or less the same during the sixth century.[71] In the light of the above, we can quite easily visualise the spectacle beheld by the Avar envoys when they were granted an audience by Justin II as narrated in Corippus's poem:

> "When the happy emperor had ascended the lofty throne and settled his limbs high up with his purple robes, the master of offices ordered the Avars to enter and announced that they were before the first doors of the imperial hall begging to see the holy feet of the merciful emperor, and he ordered with gentle voice and sentiment that they be admitted. The barbarian warriors marvelled as they crossed the first threshold and the great hall. They saw the tall men standing there, the golden shields, and looked up at their gold javelins as they glittered with their long iron tips and at the gilded helmet tops and red crests. They shuddered at the sight of the lances and cruel axes and saw the other wonders of the noble procession. And they believed that *the Roman palace was another heaven.* They rejoiced to be stared at and to appear carefree as they entered … they lie down in adoration before the throne of the emperor. But when the curtain was drawn aside and the inner part was revealed, and when the hall of the gilded building glittered and Tergazis the Avar looked up at the head of the emperor shining with the holy diadem, he lay down three times in adoration and remained fixed to the ground. The other Avars followed him in similar fear and fell on their faces, and brushed the carpets with their foreheads, and filled the spacious halls with their long hair and the imperial palace with their huge limbs. When the merciful emperor ordered the envoys to rise, the officials raised them up as they lay there, at his command and behest as he ordered."[72]

Although the poet doubtless condensed the events which he recounted from an unmistakably Roman perspective, while the exalted tone served to glorify his master on whom he depended for a lavish income, the gist of his account by and large conforms to the above picture. In fact, his poetic exaggerations and colourful

Fig. 29. Justinian I amidst his court officials, soldiers, and ecclesiastics on the apse mosaic of the San Vitale in Ravenna

evocations are a welcome addition to Petrus's matter-of-fact words: he vividly describes how the journey, which in itself was designed to inspire awe in the envoys from the moment they crossed the border, first in the provincial cities, then in Constantinople, finally culminated in the ceremonial reception held in the imperial palace. The spectacle of the emperor sitting majestically on his throne with the golden crown upon his head, clad in silk and purple, the soldiers flanking the envoys' path (*Fig. 29*), the splendid marble walls and floors, the precious tapestries, the glittering gilded ceiling, the lighting, the scent of the incense brought from distant lands all served the same purpose. The impression made on the envoys—as well as on the emperor's own subjects—is perfectly summed up by Corippus: "the Roman palace was another heaven". Borrowing the term coined by Marc Augé, Peter Brown aptly called these spaces a "magical 'Non-Place' ... in which rulers and aristocrats met in an environment carefully constructed to be a world out of this world."[73]

Envoys in the presence of God and the people

The image of a Heaven on Earth is not restricted to receptions in the Great Palace in the sources recording the reception of envoys arriving to Byzantium. The event discussed below took place several centuries later, in the tenth century, and the source recounting it too dates from the Middle Byzantine period, when ceremonies became even more elaborate and opulent compared to Late Antiquity. Yet, the roots of the recorded events can be traced to the final centuries of Antiquity. The Old Russian annals known as *Povest Vremennykh Let* ("The Tale of Bygone Years", also known as the *Russian Primary Chronicle*) record that as part of the preparations for his baptism, the Kievan Prince Vladimir sent his envoys to the Muslim Volga Bulgars, the Christians following the western rite, and the Byzantines of the eastern rite with the task of gathering information on their services. The Kievan envoys arriving to Constantinople were first received by the Emperor, who, after hearing the purpose of their mission, directed them to the Patriarch. Learning of the interest of the Prince of Kiev in the Christian faith,

> "the Patriarch ... bade the clergy assemble, and they performed the customary rites. They burned incense, and the choirs sang hymns. The Emperor accompanied the Russes to the church, and placed them in a wide space, calling their attention to the beauty of the edifice, the chanting, and the pontifical services and the ministry of the deacons, while he explained to them the worship of his God."

According to the chronicle, they recounted their experience to the Prince with the following words:

> "the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were *in heaven or on earth*. For on earth there is no such splendour or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men".[74]

It is quite obvious from the description of various teachings and services,[75] as well as from the chronicle's overall agenda, that the presentation of the different religions is somewhat biased, though hardly surprisingly so, given the Greek Orthodox faith of the author compiling the text and of his intended audience. Nevertheless, the brief accounts of the services customary among the different peoples were constructed from genuine elements and the impression made by the interior of the Hagia Sophia portrayed heartfelt feelings. Other descriptions of the church after its rebuilding by Justinian are aglow with the same rapturous admiration, and for good reason. The interior spaces and decorative style of Byzantine churches were designed to serve liturgical needs and to ensure that the congregation could fully immerse itself in the mystery of faith and in the experience of the divine. In this sense, the idea that Christian churches were microcosms reflecting the universe already made its appearance in late antique texts and the decorative programme of Middle Byzantine churches was the translation of this concept into decorative imagery.[76]

In the wake of the many reconstructions, the church interior beheld and admired by the envoys making the journey to Constantinople who also visited the Hagia Sophia in the sixth and seventh centuries[77] was not the

Fig. 30. Simulation model of the sixth-century, richly decorated interior of the Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. Reconstruction by Andreas Noback et al.

same as the spectacle unfolding before the tenth-century Kievan envoys. Nevertheless, the decoration of the interior spaces of the church rebuilt after the Nika revolt of 532 under Justinian was no less magnificent than the adornment of the audience halls of the Great Palace. The floor and the walls sparkled with marble, the ceiling and the domed roof shone with opulent gold mosaics, while the large chancel screen gleamed with silver (*Fig. 30*),[78] and were just as well suited to inspiring awe in foreign envoys as the halls of the Great Palace and the races held in the Hippodrome that could accommodate up to a sixty thousand spectators (*Fig. 31*). According to an account of the reception of envoys from Tarsus in the tenth century,[79] members of delegations arriving to the imperial capital were sometimes invited to enjoy the races. In the case of envoys arriving from Christian lands, it was quite natural that they would be invited to the church services attended by the emperor.[80] Knowing that one important element of the Empire's policy towards its non-Christian neighbours was their conversion in order to turn them into reliable allies, invitations to attend services were not solely extended to Christian envoys, as can be gleaned from a remark in Paul the Silentiary's renowned poem glorifying Justinian claiming

Fig. 31. View of the Hippodrome and the adjoining parts of the Great Palace with the Hagia Sophia and the Mese in the background, Constantinople. Conjectural reconstruction: © Tayfun Öner

that a throng of "black-limbed" (perhaps Ethiopian) envoys were so overwhelmed by the splendour of the Hagia Sophia that they "voluntarily bowed both soul and neck": in other words, they willingly converted and accepted the emperor's authority.[81] Yet, there can be no doubt that the ruler of the distant African land had made his decision to accept Christianity for political reasons well before the envoys had been sent off to Constantinople.

The limitations of psychological pressure

The accounts of the sixth-century Eastern Roman authors and the elements of the built environment offer a glimpse into the world encountered by the Avars who maintained regular contact with Constantinople from the later 550s onward. Obviously, we can only guess to what extent their encounter with this new world was a novel experience because the exact extents of their former settlement territories are not known. Nevertheless,

it seems possible that they had maintained diplomatic contacts with China and even more so with the powers of Central Asia and Iran before their arrival to Europe.[82] The Chinese and the Sasanian courts both drew from a rich array of diplomatic stratagems and had court ceremonies similar to the ones in Constantinople, and the lords of the nomadic tribes on their northern frontiers were familiar with and well versed in the cultural idiom of diplomacy.[83] Thus, even though Eastern Roman urban civilisation differed considerably from conditions in the Avars' steppe homeland both in terms of outward trappings and daily life, the envoys' encounter with this world would have meant few novelties, perhaps regarding certain details at the most. Nevertheless, we may rightly assume that the sophisticated forms of psychological pressure, an important weapon in the Byzantine diplomatic arsenal, made a deep impression. The ultimate purpose of the carefully elaborated practice was to overawe the Sasanian envoys arriving from the sophisticated Persian court, just like the Persian court spared no effort to elicit similar reactions from the envoys of the Eastern Roman Empire (or any other land, for that matter).

It is therefore quite understandable that similarly to the delegations of the neighbouring peoples travelling to the court of the period's superpowers, the Avars too made every effort to gain an advantageous position during the negotiations, of which the display of their fine garments and the parade of lavish gifts was certainly an essential, but hardly the single most important element. In this sense, the Eastern Roman accounts accentuating that the Avar envoys invoked the glorious deeds and military might of their people from the very beginning was in all likelihood not merely a literary trope evoking the image of the bellicose and uncouth barbarians projected onto the Avars. As we shall see, their threats were not empty words brandished for show—but first, let us see how a sixth-century steppean ruler received envoys in his court and how the barbarian rulers reciprocated the Eastern Roman gifts.

In the court of the Türk khagan

Even though none of the reports drawn up by the Eastern Roman envoys visiting the Avar khagans have survived that would offer a glimpse into their courts, the accounts written by Priscus who had travelled to Attila's court and the Byzantine envoy making the long journey to Ishtemi, the Türk khagan, cited by Menander, describe the protocol of the two events. Given that the latter provides an example that is closer in time, and perhaps also culturally, to the Avars, we shall focus our attention on this narrative. Among the many fascinating details preserved by the historian, one is particularly interesting: how Zemarchus, the high-ranking Eastern Roman official serving as the *magister militum per Orientem*, was received by the khagan.

According to Menander's account, Sizabul (the Ishtemi of the Türk runic inscriptions) who had summoned the envoy,

> "was in a tent, sitting upon a golden throne with two wheels, which could be drawn when necessary by one horse. They greeted the barbarian and offered him their gifts, as was the custom, and were received by whose task it was. Then Zemarchus said, 'Ruler of so many peoples, our great Emperor through me, his messenger, says to you, 'may your fortune always be good and success be with you, who are our friend and well-disposed towards the Roman state. May thou always conquer your enemies and make them your plunder. May jealousy, which can destroy the laws of friendship, be far, far away from us. The tribes of the Turks and those subject to the Turks are my friends, and may you think thus about us also.'"[84]

Thus, the first element of the audience was the envoy's elaborate greeting addressed to the khagan and the presentation of the gifts, which was then reciprocated by the Türk khagan. This protocol was essentially identical with the one followed in the Byzantine court. However, the fine distinction between, and separation of, the formal and informal phases of the reception of envoys and the virtual inaccessibility of the sovereign to the envoys during the former did not attain the same level of sophistication as in Constantinople and China.[85] The accounts in the sources dating mainly from the Middle Byzantine period reveal that in certain cases, the Eastern Roman emperors likewise invited the envoys of foreign peoples to their banquets.[86] However, these were not part of the formal reception of envoys. In contrast, Zemarchus was seated at the khagan's table on the occasion of the first reception:

> "Then they turned to feasting and spent the rest of the day enjoying lavish entertainment in the same tent. It was furnished with silken hangings dyed without skill in various colours. They did not drink wine like ours which is squeezed from the grape, for their land does not support the grape vine [...]. They drank their fill of another barbarous kind of sweet wine. Then they returned to their lodgings. On the morrow they met in another hut which was similarly decorated with multicoloured silken hangings. In it stood statues of different shapes. Sizabul sat there on a couch made completely of gold. In the middle of the building were golden urns, water-sprinklers and also golden pitchers. They feasted again, and when they had spoken and heard as much as was necessary during their drinking, they departed. On the following day they came to another dwelling in which there were gilded wooden pillars and a couch of beaten gold which was supported by four golden peacocks. In front of this dwelling were drawn up over a wide area wagons containing many silver objects, dishes and bowls, and a large number of statues of animals, also of silver and in no way inferior to those which we make; so wealthy is the ruler of the Turks."[87]

The reception of the envoys and their entertainment lasted for several days among the Türks, too. The Byzantines combined this with a tour of the magnificent sights of the imperial city and of the palace. For obvious reasons, the Türks enthralled their visitors with the khagan's luxurious tents[88] and its silken hangings, silver,

and gold—and, as Zemarchus's words reveal, they achieved the desired effect. Even if the Byzantine envoy did not always realise this, modern students of the text are well aware that a sizeable portion of the valuables displayed in the khagan's tent and the dishes served at the feast originated from distant lands. The "silken hangings" covering the tent interiors were no doubt predominantly acquired from China, or were of Sasanian or Central Asian origin, while the "barbarous kind of sweet wine" served at the feast was Chinese or Chinese-type sweet rice wine.[89] The statues seen by Zemarchus on the third day probably came from the Buddhist Chinese world, and perhaps also from Iran or Sogdia, while the khagan's golden couch with its peacocks quite obviously originated from the Iranian realm,[90] and it seems likely that a part of the silver and gold vessels may have similarly been of foreign make.

The opulence of Ishtemi's court was hardly unique. Two decades after Zemarchus's visit, the Persians defeating the Türks carried off "couches, tables, and thrones of gold, horse-trappings, jars" as part of their booty, all objects that are known to have been possessed by the Türk court. Bayan, the Avar khagan, received the Eastern Roman envoys sent to broker the terms of a peace treaty seated on a golden throne erected on one of the islets of the River Sava.[91] Earlier, in 519, the Chinese Buddhist monk Sung-Yun visiting the Hephthalites living along the northern frontier of the Sasanian Empire recounted that the sovereign received the envoys bearing the gifts sent as tribute by the neighbouring states while seated on a golden couch supported by four phoenix birds.[92]

Some half a century after Zemarchus's journey, another Chinese Buddhist monk had a similar experience in the court of another Western Türk khagan. In his account of his visit, a detail unmentioned in Menander's above-quoted narrative describing the ruler's surroundings merits attention. The monk speaks of the silk robe worn by the ruler, the fine textiles covering his tent, and the "golden flower ornaments" as well as of the magnificent garments of embroidered silk worn by the khagan's officers, the awe-inspiring line of his armed retinue and bodyguards, and the music accompanying the lavish feast[93]—all elements which were an integral part of the paraphernalia of the audiences given at the Byzantine court, too.

The accumulation and, even more so, the display of valuable commodities of foreign origin served the accentuation of wealth and power. Their acquisition called for major financial power and foreign connections, the prerogative of the high-ranking members of society. At the same time, a social display based on objects from faraway regions would only impress those, who were fully aware of their origins, rarity, and value in the given local milieu, while the material value would be quite easily appreciated by visitors from distant lands. It is no mere coincidence that the overall impression made on the Chinese monk cited in the above was that "even though he [the Türk khagan] ruled over felt tents, [his court] had a noble beauty".[94] Viewing the opulence of the Türk khagan's court in a broader perspective, it is quite apparent that the splendour of the Eastern Roman, Sasanian, and Chinese courts was on an entirely different scale with the monumentality of their built environment and the profundity of their past as epitomised by the monuments accumulated over successive generations, whereby they disposed of a far more complex array of diplomatic tools to dazzle their guests. One fascinating example of the psychological reaction to the cityscape moulded by the countless monuments erected during the

centuries is provided by the visit of Constantine II (r. 337–361) to Rome in 357 as described by Ammianus Marcellinus. The emperor who had spent much of his reign in the empire's frontier regions and provinces was shown around the *Urbs* during his first and only sojourn in Rome as if on a guided tour. He marvelled at the magnificent buildings and "he complained of Fame as either incapable or spiteful, because while always exaggerating everything, in describing what there is in Rome, she becomes shabby."[95]

The surroundings of steppean rulers differed significantly from this urban milieu, even if the khagan's tents could hold several hundred or even a few thousand people, and in the eyes of the equestrian nomads, their ruler's "golden tent" eventually metamorphosed into a potent symbol of power.[96]

The reciprocity of gift-giving

The sources cited in the foregoing clearly reveal that gift-giving between diplomatic partners was an indispensable part of late antique diplomatic exchanges. One intriguing and inevitable question is how the lords of the neighbouring or more distant lands reciprocated the valuable commodities received from the Eastern Roman court, even more so, because there was a continuous and strong competition between the parties in this respect, too. The Chinese and Byzantine attitude was that the value of the gifts offered by the emperor always had to exceed that of the gifts received by him, asserting his superior status eclipsing all others'.[97]

While the sources provide ample information on the valuables presented by the Byzantine court, they are decidedly silent about the gifts brought by the visiting envoys. The single relevant detail in Petrus's account focusing on general diplomatic business can be found in the instructions concerning the procedure to be followed if the gifts presented to the emperor also included horses,[98] a likelihood that can be reasonably assumed in the case of the Avars. Being a stockbreeding pastoral population, they had sizeable horse herds, and the gifting of these noble beasts was quite common among the steppean communities, as often mentioned in the Chinese sources of the east. Priscus records that Maximinus, the Eastern Roman envoy visiting the Huns, was presented with horses on Attila's orders,[99] while Anatolius and Nomus received horses and valuable furs worn by "Scythian kings" from Attila.[100] Bishop Eusebius, the biographer of the Emperor Constantine I, also mentions horses when describing the valuable goods sent to the emperor by foreign peoples, and even though he does not specifically mention these peoples by name, they were in all likelihood the Empire's nomadic neighbours.[101] The custom of gifting valuable animals is reflected in that the relations between the Chinese and the Inner Asian nomads often involved gifts of hunting birds sent by the latter to their Chinese negotiating partners.[102]

Eusebius's list of gifts includes a variety of arms, bows among them, and colourful garments of cloth woven with gold,[103] the latter most likely from Persia. Priscus too records that Attila often made gifts of valuable clothing, usually made from the skin and fur of animals that were not native to the Mediterranean, and were thus regarded as unusual, exotic pieces by the Romans. The gifts borne by the Türk khagan's envoys despatched to

Constantinople included silk, although in this case bolts of silk were probably meant (*Fig. 32*).[104] On other occasions, the Eastern Türk khagan sent valuable textiles from the Iranian world to the Chinese court and, speaking of the Türks, we should recall the slave girl presented to Zemarchus by the khagan.[105] The latter were particularly popular: slaves could be easily acquired during the constant wars and were highly prized possessions. Gifts of weapons, mentioned by Eusebius, appear in other accounts, too. Thus, for example, upon his arrival to Constantine VII's court in Constantinople, Liudprand of Cremona presented the gifts he had personally bought and brought for the emperor: "nine excellent breastplates, seven excellent shields with gilt bosses, two gilt silver cups, swords, spears, skewers and four *carmizasia* slaves".[106]

Fig. 32. Foreign envoys bearing gifts portrayed on the mural of the western wall of the reception hall in the palace of King Varkhuman (r. *ca.* 640–670) in Afrasiab (modern Samarkand), Uzbekistan. The man in the middle holds a bolt of silk

Six Decades of Avar-Eastern Roman Relations: The Rise and Fall of an Asymmetrical Relationship

In the previous chapters, we traced the first decade of Avar-Eastern Roman relations, exploring the rationales underlying the political moves of the two parties and the world of diplomacy, the main arena of interactions. We have seen how, with the changes in the political climate, a promising and profitable alliance soured into an uneasy neighbourship within a few years. In this chapter, the focus will be on exploring the dynamics behind the khagan's open threats conveyed by his envoys immediately after Justin II's ascension to the throne that "our leader cannot be a good friend of yours and of the Roman state unless he first receive that for which he forebore to attack the Romans".[107]

Pastoralist stockbreeders in the neighbourship of urban empires

In order to better understand the Avars' attitude, it seems prudent to begin with a chronologically and culturally similar, but spatially distant parallel. Despite several differences, the Avars' policy towards Byzantium after their sudden appearance in Europe in the mid-sixth century, precipitated by the rise of the Inner Asian Türk Khagante, shares numerous similarities with that empire's dealings with China. Ildikó Ecsedy painted the following tableu of the trade and diplomatic strategies pursued by the Türks vis-à-vis China:

> "Growing strong, the Türks appeared in the area of the Chinese frontier fortresses and made diplomatic overtures to China in order to exchange their surplus livestock for silk. They needed the emperor's goodwill, and so they sent him gifts, 'products of their land', principally livestock, mostly horses; and just as they expected, they received in return silk, the usual Chinese gift presented to powerful 'barbarian' envoys. Soon, they set out for China with even more animals, to obtain more silk. However, the court felt that it had received more than enough horses and did not send more silk in return, or at least not the desired quantity. The disappointed Türks promptly mounted a campaign against China. In the wake of their military achievements, the emperor, finding himself in a dire situation, sent them silk to ensure their goodwill. The *qayan* of the Türks again sent herds of livestock and horses as a token of his friendship, but when its reciprocation was delayed, he took offense and made demands. He sent ever more horses to the emperor, livestock unneeded and unwanted in China (or sent at an unsuitable time or of a poor breed, etc.), and if it was not reciprocated with silk (or other valuable luxury items), more abundant 'gifts' were extorted from the court through raids and incursions." [108]

Ecsedy's main contention is that one purpose of this "extorted trade" was to ensure that the Türks' "product surplus" in livestock, mainly horses, would reach the appropriate markets and be sold there, and thus provide access to the coveted Chinese commodities, which in turn enabled them to successfully partake in long-distance trade after satisfying their own needs and to deliver much sought-after silks to distant lands.[109] The feasibility and success of this strategy, known to have been employed by the Hsiungnu and the Uyghurs, too, depended on the momentary political situation in China as well as on the extent to which she was at the mercy of her nomadic neighbours.[110] Success in establishing profitable trade relations simultaneously boosted the rise of a new nomadic dynasty[111] and played a crucial role in the cohesion of an empire made up of a motley of different peoples by providing them an opportunity to partake in wealth accumulation. It is therefore quite understandable that the elites of these steppe societies spared no effort in forcing this exchange onto their neighbours.

Similarly to the policy embraced by the Türks and Uyghurs towards China, a central and decisive element of the Avars' policy towards Byzantium was to gain as great a share as possible of the neighbouring empire's wealth. They were neither the first, nor the last pastoral stockbreeding society with similar ambitions. Aside from the desire for possessions, an innate element of human nature, the main drive behind this policy was the distinctive nomadic economy based on the dominance of pastoral stockbreeding. To be sure, this economic system emerged as a masterly adaptation to the environment of the Eurasian grassy steppe, a region largely unsuitable for intensive agricultural production under pre-modern conditions. At the same time, the rise of this economy also led to a certain measure of one-sidedness with the permanent traits of a strongly specialised shortage economy. Although scholarly opinion is divided regarding its extent, it seems likely that stockbreeding pastoralist communities were largely self-sufficient in terms of the basic necessities,[112] but relied on their neighbours for adding some variety to the limited range of agricultural products cropped by themselves. This was particularly so in regions that were less suited to agriculture owing to environmental and climatic factors as well as during the lean years caused by the relatively regularly recurring natural disasters decimating their herds (such as droughts and harsh winters with extended periods of frost).

There was definitely a demand among nomads for the craft products of the neighbouring empires, too, particularly for silver and gold metalwork and valuable textiles, which represented a higher relative value and could be easily transported when they were on the move. One reason for the predilection for these commodities was that communities engaged in Eurasian nomadic pastoralism were fairly small (*Figs 33–34*), the population was relatively dispersed in order to maintain a self-sufficient economy among the prevalent geographic conditions, and the population density of the steppe was low. This was highly conducive to production on a home industry level, even if there were several specialised craftsmen active among the nomads (smiths, weaponsmiths, goldsmiths, etc.). However, only rarely and in a few places were there conditions favouring the emergence of specialised workshops producing better-quality products at a lower cost, for which the size of urban communities and their concentration in one location provided more fertile ground. Nomads also relied on their sedentary

Fig. 33. Yurts erected beside each other in Mongolia (Gol Mod)

neighbours for acquiring raw materials facilitating wealth accumulation since one part of these such as gold, silver, gemstones, and the like had to be mined where natural deposits were to be found, while very special conditions were required for the production of other commodities such as silk. These played a pivotal role in nomadic economies not only because of their minimal storage space requirement and easy portability, as well as the widespread demand for them on virtually every market, but also because they were not prone to damage or destruction by environmental conditions that cyclically threatened the animal stock, the other main source of wealth among pastoral communities.[113] The conversion of the surplus in animal stocks into precious metals and silks enabled the accumulation of wealth in commodities that would not lose their value even if animal herds were harmed for one reason or another.

These, then, are the main reasons that nomadic communities invested so much energy in marketing the surplus of their animal stock on the marketplaces of their agrarian neighbours, with the profits used for

procuring the various goods they needed. If agrarian societies were not open to this, or if the value of the marketed animals did not cover the purchasing needs of the pastoral communities, or if the necessary amount of surplus was not available, there was often no other option left than to coerce the "exchange" by force of their weapons. Given that the market value of the nomads' animal surplus did not always add up to the amount of merchandise they desired, the natural course of events was almost inevitably channelled in this direction. Living in small communities characterised by a low level of the division of labour and knowing that they could only rely on themselves for protecting their own and their animals' safety, the proportion of weapon-bearing men was outstandingly high in nomadic societies, which ultimately paved the way for acquiring the goods of their neighbours with their arms.[114]

Taken together, these elements all played a pivotal role during the existence of the major steppe empires. Although the birth of steppe empires was ultimately a military response to the internal conflicts between steppean communities, their main purpose was not the acquisition of the goods of the neighbouring empires as often argued; nevertheless, the cohesion and successful maintenance of these polities essentially called for the continuous procurement of external economic resources.[115] The mainstay of a steppe empire's cohesion, whose political structure was based on an intricate network of personal dependencies between family, kinship groups, and tribal leaders and those who exercised political leadership, were the goods distributed to the leaders of the communities. One salient feature of the image of the good ruler as the supreme patron heading the empire was the generosity with which he distributed gifts to his subjects and, in this sense, to his clients.[116] Largesse not only increased the ruler's prestige among his subjects, but, being unable to reciprocate with a gift of equal value, it also indebted clients to their patron—the gift would be "repaid" by services performed at some later date. The upkeep of this elaborate social system, the retainment of the subjects, and the increase of their number called for ever-expanding material resources. However, instead of the redistribution of existing resources, this could most conveniently be achieved by drawing on external resources, which could involve profitable trade transactions (whether genuine or extorted), war, and taxation in the wake of military successes and conquests. Failures in these ventures meant a decline in the amount of valuable commodities distributed to clients, which in turn led to dwindling loyalties and shifting allegiances, a move regarded as quite legitimate in nomadic political attitudes.[117]

Trade, diplomacy, and war were part and parcel of this intricate web of relations. Depending on the actual historical situation, nomads chose the strategy that held out the promise of delivering the desired outcome. The dynamics described here were often almost inextricably intertwined, to the extent that it is sometimes virtually impossible to assign one or another even to a particular category understood in the modern sense of the term. Neither is the intense flow of cultural goods between these societies particularly surprising in view of the regular and lively contacts. However, in terms of material culture, this only involved the adoption of elements that

could be reconciled with the lifestyle and cultural norms of a given community and were therefore deemed desirable.

While the Türk and Avar examples share numerous similarities, there are also pronounced differences. According to the Chinese descriptions, the Türks did have certain goods coveted by the Chinese that they could offer in exchange for the commodities they needed, principally Chinese silk. This, then, led to exchanges taking the form of trade, even if an extorted one, meaning that transactions were not always based on genuine market mechanisms. In contrast, the Eastern Roman texts make no mention of barters of this type with the Avars. One of the reasons for this was that although the carrying capacity of the Inner Asian steppe was lower owing to the less favourable climatic conditions than in Eastern Europe, the Türk khagans nevertheless had a substantial surplus of horses levied as tax from the tribes they ruled in their extensive empire, which they collected for commercial purposes. In contrast, the Avars fleeing the growing power of the Türks hardly had a similar surplus immediately at their disposal and neither was the number of the peoples who had submitted to their rule as great as the ones vanquished by the Türk khagans.

Compared to the Inner Asian (*Fig. 34*) and Eastern European steppe, the smaller extent of the Alföld region of the Carpathian Basin could—according to various estimates—only sustain incomparably smaller animal stocks, horses among them, on which large-scale trade could hardly be based.[118] Neither did the tradition of extorted trade similar to the one practiced by the Türks and the Uyghurs evolve in the Eastern European region: nothing of the sort is mentioned in relation to the Huns and the Oghur peoples, the latter occupying the region immediately before the Avars' arrival. In fact, most of the time, the communities of the Eastern European steppe had no genuine need for these types of exchanges. They could generally act as middlemen in the trade between the lands to their north and south, between the forest belt and the Mediterranean and Iranian world, even if they did, on occasion, seize the commodities deemed desirable in the south by force from their northern neighbours, which in this sense can be regarded as form of extorted trade.[119] Obviously, this should not be taken to imply that they were averse to serving as mercenaries, trading their military prowess for a reasonable sum, or that they would refrain from military threats and operations if need be. In the case of the Huns of the Carpathian Basin, the sources mention that one of their recurring demands when negotiating peace treaties with the Romans was the opening and maintenance of the marketplaces near the frontier as well as the specification of their locations. However, no mention is made of the commodities traded by them on these markets.[120]

Essentially, the same mechanism ensured the successful extortion of the financial "support" from the neighbouring empires that would provide the necessary fuel for maintaining the social system of the Türk and Avar empires. Threats of their military power to add weight to their demands and, if this proved ineffective, the plundering of the frontier regions of the neighbouring country. Thus, the procurement of the coveted material goods was not solely, or only partially, based on the exchange of their own products. To use a modern expression,

Fig. 34. Steppe landscape in Mongolia. The white and brown dots are the structures of a nomadic camp

a sizeable portion of their revenue (what we would today call their GDP) was not produced by them, but was covered from external resources seized by force. The maintenance of this state of affairs for the leaders of urbanised empires was advantageous only when and if they were unable to effectively defend their lands,[121] and if they suffered fewer losses by meeting the demands for valuables of their neighbours than in the case of a prolonged war involving the loss of taxes and the costs incurred by defensive campaigns. The Avar strategy only worked until the sums paid to the barbarians did not impose a greater burden on the Roman state treasury than the revenues from a peace purchased through various expenditures.[122]

"Brave khagans were they": The golden decades of Avar power

As already noted in the foregoing, Bayan's forces clashed with Constantinople almost the very moment the Avars set foot in the Carpathian Basin. The immediate cause was that after hearing of the Gepids' defeat by the Avars, the commander of Sirmium, a city previously controlled by the Gepids, had surrendered the city to the Roman troops stationed on the other side of the frontier (*Fig. 35*) in exchange for asylum for himself and his retinue on Roman soil. Handing over the Gepidic treasury guarded in the city was apparently not too high a price for him to pay. However, the khagan laying siege to the city quite naturally felt that after his victory over the Gepids, their lands and treasures belonged to him. He voiced his demands during the negotiations with the Roman commander defending the city, adding that he now also laid claim to the subsidies earlier paid by Constantinople to the Utigurs and Kutrigurs who had submitted to his rule. He demanded that the Gepidic leader sheltered by the Romans be extradited, apparently in order to prevent Constantinople from installing him at some later time as the ruler of the Gepids subdued by the Avars and thereby destabilising the Avar hinterland. After his demands were rejected, Bayan reacted by following up his threats delivered by his envoys: he despatched ten thousand Kutrigur warriors to plunder the Byzantine lands in Dalmatia.[123]

Fig. 35. The main Balkanic targets of the Avar campaigns led against the Eastern Roman Empire mentioned in the text

Yet, his intention could hardly have been to provoke an immediate and permanent armed conflict. The first steps in the occupation of the Carpathian Basin in 567–568 meant the establishment of his political control over the region, involving the transformation of the power structures of the conquered population groups, the creation of a new political and military organisation, the selection and investiture of new leaders, and the distribution of the land among the peoples of the khaganate. His awareness that the envoys of the Türk khagan had travelled to Constantinople again in 568 meant that Bayan and his entourage had to proceed cautiously. The alliance between the two was directed not only against the Sasanian Empire, but against the Avars, too.[124]

Preoccupied for a longer period with establishing himself in the new homeland and with the consolidation of his power over the vanquished peoples under the shadow of the Türk threat—which was perceived as genuine for many years despite the immense distance between them—Bayan was hardly in the position of launching major campaigns against Constantinople's Balkanic territories. Although clashes with alternating success broke out along the frontier, some of these were initiated by Justin II's administration. In the earlier 570s, there were several diplomatic exchanges between the imperial city and Avaria, all characterised by the customary threatening undertones of the preceding years, with the Avars again demanding the payment of the annual subsidy previously sent to the Utigurs and Kutrigurs and the extradition of the Gepidic refugees. The Avars finally achieved their goal following a victory over the Byzantine army near the frontier in 574: Constantinople pledged to send an annual tribute of 80,000 gold solidi to the khagan. The main reason for the conclusion of a peace treaty and the willingness to send a hefty tribute was that in 572, Justin II started a prolonged war against the Sasanian Empire, secure in the hope of an alliance with the Türks and the momentary lull of the Avar threat. However, the alliance with the Türks was short-lived, in part owing to the agreement between the Byzantines and the Avars, and, more importantly, owing to the military failure of the Türks against the Persians.[125] Neither did the peace concluded with the Avars last long. In 578, the Byzantine fleet ferried the Avar troops across the Danube to conduct a punitive campaign against the Slavs of the Lower Danube region ravaging Byzantine territories, whom the khagan regarded as his own subjects. By the end of the decade, after his envoys had received the negotiated tribute in Constantinople, Bayan's army encircled Sirmium, a city of strategic importance held by the Romans, and forced it to surrender after a three-year siege in 582.[126]

Bayan, the founder of the khaganate, died shortly after the occupation of Sirmium. Knowing that the succession of the oldest son or one of the sons of the deceased ruler was not self-evident in the nomadic political system—since according to their traditions, kingship fell to the most able person in the clan—it comes as no surprise that after his election, Bayan's successor immediately took steps to demonstrate his power and might. To prove his mettle as a charismatic leader and worthy successor, in 583 he turned to Constantinople with the demand that the annual tribute be raised by a further 20,000 solidi to ensure peace. After being refused, to add substance to his demand and to demonstrate his ableness as a military leader and the support of the heavenly powers,[127] he besieged and captured several important fortified towns and forts along the Danubian frontier,

including Singidunum (modern Belgrade) and Viminacium (modern Kostolac in Serbia). His troops advanced as far as Thrace and the gateway to the Peloponnese. Tied up on the Persian front, the Eastern Roman leadership agreed to the annual tribute of 100,000 gold solidi in 585 to purchase peace. Despite the agreement and the payment of the tribute, the next two years again saw the Avars' advance. The khagan's armies first devastated the forts of the Danubian frontier in 586, while the next year they invaded Thrace and swept away all resistance with the exception of the larger, better defended cities, effectively clearing the road to Constantinople. Instead of large, major battles, the campaigns were in effect series of smaller clashes, in the course of which the khagan could show off his personal courage and military acumen to his subjects. Although he was unable to extort a higher tribute even at the peak of his successes, the booty and the ransom paid for the captured prisoners increased his own wealth and enriched the treasuries of his clients.

While the crumbling of the Danubian frontier defences did not elicit an active reaction from the Constantinopolitan administration, the advance of the Avar and Slav troops threatening the imperial city's immediate neighbourhood galvanised the Eastern Romans into action. However, the partial successes did not alter the basic situation. Although the khaganate did not exercise a tight control over Constantinople's north-eastern Balkanic territories, it had at least as great an influence on the course of events as the region's official political overlords. This is best illustrated by the fact that when, after the conclusion of the Persian war in 591, Maurice launched a major offensive against the Slavs of the Lower Danube region who regularly ravaged the Empire, the Avars' envoys confronted the Roman army in Durustorum (modern Silistra in Bulgaria) and demanded an explanation for their presence. In other words, the Avars had their outposts on Roman territory, through which they were informed of the deployment of a hostile army. The extension of the khaganate's sphere of power is also reflected by that although the khagan did not offer any protection to the barbarian groups in the Lower Danube region he considered to be his clients, he nevertheless demanded one-half of the booty, claiming that his subjects had suffered grave damages. We would have a better understanding of the genuine political situation if we knew which power (or perhaps both) taxed the population in the north-eastern Balkans. Even so, it is quite obvious that Constantinople had lost much of her exclusive military control over the region by this time.

Temporarily freed of the burden of the Persian war and faced with the defence of the imperial city and the empire's territorial integrity, Constantinople could hardly acquiesce to the situation. In 594, she again waged war against the Slavs of the Lower Danube region; the next year, Priscus and his troops returned Singidunum to Roman hands. Although the khagan regarded the restoration of Roman rule over the frontier region as a clear breach of the peace, he did not immediately respond with a call to arms. He first turned his attention to securing his rule over the Slavic communities living along the khaganate's western borders, while in the south he settled for ravaging the Eastern Roman borderland in Dalmatia. The Avar army was only unleashed on the eastern Balkans in 597. The campaign was successful; however, the outbreak of a plague causing heavy losses in both camps forced the two parties to agree to a truce. Although the Avars agreed to fix the Danubian frontier

Fig. 36. Solidus bearing the portrait of Phocas minted during the emperor's reign from Grave 3 of Szentendre, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

conforming to the situation before the outbreak of the hostilities, the khagan succeeded in coercing an increase in the yearly tribute, which rose to 120,000 solidi. Nevertheless, the khagan's charisma as a successful military commander was seriously blemished by the plague, which took a heavy toll on his warriors, including four of his own sons. To make matters worse, Priscus, the Roman commander who had proven himself in the Balkanic campaigns, again marched to the Danubian frontier with his army in 599 and, to the surprise of the Avars, he crossed the river with his battle-hardened soldiers and, advancing along the Tisza, penetrated deeply into the khaganate's heartland. Similarly to the campaigns against the Slavs in the Lower Danube region, he retreated to Roman soil after scoring a series of victories.

In order to strengthen his position, the Avar ruler, who had lost another four sons in the clashes, strengthened his ties with the Franks and the Langobards in the west, while in the east, he defeated the Antae, allies of Byzantium, who in a concerted move with the Eastern Roman army arriving from the south attacked the Lower Danubian Slavs from the north in 602. The main purpose of the Avar army sent by the khagan was probably less the protection of his external allies than the disruption of Constantinople's alliance system and brandishing new military successes. The first major cracks in the confidence in the Avar ruler were apparent by this time. As Theophylact Simocatta noted, "large numbers defected from the Avars and hastened to desert to the emperor".[128] We do not know whether seeking an alliance with the enemy affected the khagan's immediate milieu or was only restricted to the clients in the Avar alliance system. Yet, it is hardly mere chance that roughly at the same time as the victory won over the Antae of Eastern Europe, a new royal dynasty arose to rule over the western Old Turkic tribes living in the Dnieper and Dniester region, which, or so it was known in the Byzantine court, acknowledged the overlordship of the Avars already in the 630s. Yet, the opportunity to restore the khagan's power in the long term was not forged by these successes. To the great fortune of the Avar ruler and his entourage, the pressure burdening the Avars was ultimately eased by the policy of Emperor Maurice and his administration, which led the Roman troops to rebel owing to the army's forced advance on the Danubian front. The army proclaimed Phocas emperor (r. 602–610, *Fig. 36*). After taking control of Constantinople, the new emperor had Maurice and his family executed.[129]

The crisis of the Eastern Roman Empire and the collapse of the Avar strategy

Within a few decades, the good fortune enjoyed by the Avar khagan and his milieu in the early seventh century turned into misfortune. The over four-decade-long balance of Avar-Byzantine relations was upset by the events of 602 or, better said, by its long-term repercussions. After Phocas ascended the throne, Khusraw II Parviz (r. 590, 591–628), the Sasanian king, annulled the peace concluded under Maurice and, taking advantage of the Türks' weakness on the eastern front, launched a large-scale attack on Byzantium in 603 (*Fig. 37*). The year 608 saw the eruption of a revolt led by the north African Heraclius (*Fig. 38*), leading to the assassination of Phocas and the

Fig. 37. The main battlegrounds of the Avar-Eastern Roman, Eastern Roman-Sasanian, and Eastern Roman-Muslim clashes during the earlier seventh century, and the rough extent of the Early Avar settlement territory (green) and Avar sphere of political control/influence (blue)

Fig. 38. Solidus bearing the portrait of Heraclius and his son Heraclius Constantine, minted during the emperor's reign. Szekszárd-Tószegi dűlő, Grave 1503, Wosinsky Mór County Museum, Szekszárd

imperial coronation of the rebel in 610. Yet, Heraclius (r. 610–641) lost the most precious provinces of his empire in rapid succession: in the wake of their victories in Mesopotamia and the Caucasus, Khusraw's armies broke into Syria and Anatolia in 611. Damascus fell in 613, followed by the conquest of Jerusalem in 614, and Egypt too came under Persian sway. The first successful counter-strike came in 622; a few years later, in 626, the Persians advanced as far a Chalcedon in Anatolia and threatened Constantinople itself at the time of the Avar siege of the city. However, the Byzantine fleet effectively prevented them from crossing the Bosporus and from joining the siege. Although Heraclius's troops and their Türk allies had advanced into Mesopotamia in 627 and stormed Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital, before returning victoriously to the Eastern Roman lands, they could bask in their success for no more than a few years. The advancing Arab armies took Damascus in 634 and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Byzantine army at Yarmuk in 636. Jerusalem fell in 638, and Alexandria and Egypt were occupied by the new conquerors in 641.[130]

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Balkanic provinces were no longer a priority by the 570s and 580s for the Eastern Roman administration, which was at war with the Persians. Faced with the choice between the flourishing Near Eastern and Anatolian provinces and the northern and central Balkanic region whose economy had slumped from the third century onward,[131] the Byzantine administration would hardly have hesitated where to concentrate its available financial and military resources, or which territories to retain and regain. Although there are no statistical data from the early seventh century to illustrate the differences between the economic values of these two major regions, a dataset from roughly a millennium later, no matter how distant, does shed some light on this issue. In the 1490s, the annual revenue of the central treasury of the Ottoman Empire ruling over the Balkans and Anatolia was between *ca.* 1,000,000 and 1,300,000 gold coins, which increased to almost 5,000,000 by the late 1520s, following Selim I's extensive conquests in the Near East and Egypt. In the previous years, about 85% of the revenues came from the Balkanic region, while in 1527–1528, Egypt alone gave 42% of the treasury's revenues.[132] It is therefore hardly surprising that Phocas, and Heraclius after him, transferred most of the troops they could muster to the frontlines of the wars against Persia, then against each other, and finally against the Muslims advancing from Arabia—in effect abandoning the Byzantine lands in the Balkans and providing an opening for the Avars.

Constantinople was fully aware of the perils of this situation,[133] and thus parallel to the withdrawal of the army, Phocas increased the sum of the yearly tribute paid to the Avars, hoping to secure his back.[134] The decade-long silence in the sources about any new major incursions indicate that his calculations probably paid off. This

situation changed in the mid-610s and in the decade's later half when we are told about the destruction of Naissus (modern Niš in Serbia) and Serdica (modern Sofia in Bulgaria), the last major cities in the central Balkans, and the repeated sieges of Thessalonica.[135] Although the sources do not reveal whether the Byzantines paid the annual price of peace, the distribution of Byzantine coins in Avaria certainly seems to indicate this.[136] Theophanes's entry dated 618/619 merely records that similarly to Phocas, Heraclius approached the khagan and reached an agreement with him regarding the yearly tribute, perhaps even offering an increase in order to secure his hinterland before marching against the Persians.[137] In any case, the khagan still sensed an opportunity to increase the money extorted from Byzantium: after learning of Heraclius's new campaign against the Persians from the emperor's envoys,[138] the Avars again raided Thrace in 623, and they even attempted to set a trap for the emperor under the guise of signing a peace treaty, but Heraclius managed to escape capture.[139] Even so, because of the Persian threat, the emperor had no choice but to again turn to the khagan, showering him with many gifts and the offer of an annual 200,000 solidi. It remains unknown whether this sum had actually been delivered—the relevant passage only mentions the promise of this tribute. However, the chronological distribution of the Byzantine coins in Avaria would nevertheless suggest that the tribute had been paid.[140] In any case, the khagan again led an expedition against Thrace in 626. The Byzantine feelings about his recurrent visits were succinctly and neatly summed up in the *Chronicon Paschale* with a sentence put into the mouth of the Avar ruler, who instructed his envoy despatched to the imperial city with the following words: "Go and see, how the people of the city are willing to conciliate me, and what they are willing to give me to make me retire."[141]

The siege of Constantinople by the Avars and their allies in 626 eventually failed, and this aborted siege is often portrayed as a major or even decisive defeat, leading to the fatal weakening of Avar power. However, looking at the chain of events, another interpretation is equally feasible. It seems unlikely that the Avars undertook the siege of Thessalonica and Constantinople with the intention of settling there after their conquest. The northern and central Balkanic cities such as Naissus and Serdica occupied in the 610s were not annexed to the khaganate, as neither were the territories lying far south of Sirmium in the sixth century. The Huns followed the same strategy in the fifth century: by achieving the military evacuation of the northern Balkans through a series of peace treaties, the goal was to keep the enemy as far from their borders as possible and to secure the military route in the south rather than to occupy new lands for settlement. While we do know of nomad dynasties appropriating the Chinese throne in Chinese-nomadic relations, the differing biogeographical conditions made this option quite attractive. In other cases, however, China's nomadic neighbours strove to exert political influence over the emperor by the temporary occupation of Chinese territories.[142]

In any case, the occupation of the cities lying several hundreds of kilometres south of the Danubian frontier would hardly have meant more than a chance to seize their riches and the potential of a further increase in the annual tribute (which in itself would have been well worth the effort). More importantly, the factors previously moulding Avar-Byzantine relations had changed profoundly by the mid-620s. The northern Balkanic

region was left desolate by the many decades of war: there are barely any traces of the region's previous population in the archaeological record, best illustrated by the numismatic finds: "the decline and disappearance of the Byzantine way of life are clearly reflected by the distribution of copper coins. … the regular circulation of current coins had ceased altogether in the heartland of the Balkans in the 620s".[143] Some of the Empire's Balkanic lands were occupied by new barbarian communities designated as Slavs in the sources. The very fact that the Byzantine army had not unleashed punitive expeditions in the wake of a single Avar incursion made one point painfully clear, namely that until the Empire managed to regain her outstandingly important eastern provinces, the Byzantine administration would be content with the protection and defence of the few southern Balkanic cities still under her rule, and most importantly, of Constantinople. Accordingly, the Byzantines did not pursue the retreating Avars or mount a punitive strike, but neither did they initiate a truce resulting in the payment of a new tribute. Instead, they redirected the money intended to buy peace—probably a sum smaller than the one paid to the Avars—to the Avars' eastern neighbour, the Bulgar ruler Kuvrat who had turned against the khagan. This dashed any hopes for collecting the earlier "protection money" and further chances of extorting gold; the ebb in the flow of Byzantine gold to the Avar lands after 626 is clearly reflected in the numismatic record.[144]

The demise of the wealth extortion and its aftermath

Similarly to the other major nomadic empires of the eastern steppe, the Avar Khaganate was a patchwork of communities bound by looser or stronger strands that had been "gathered" and subdued by the khagan and his kinsfolk during the first century of the khaganate's European history.[145] The main cohesive force was submission to the ruling dynasty's power and the common interests. There can be little doubt regarding the nature of the latter and it is also quite obvious how the dynasty and its entourage maintained the loyalty of their subjects. In both cases, the lynchpin was military power obedient

Fig. 39. Jug 2 of the Sânnicolau Mare/Nagyszentmiklós Treasure with the depiction of the "victorious prince" in its medallion (copy), Móra Ferenc Museum, Szeged

to the dynasty and the successes against the neighbours, principally Constantinople, and the wealth in its wake, from which the communities under Avar rule received their share, even if to differing extents. We know little about how the groups of different ancestry and culture viewed and perceived each other. Given that most of them are known only through their archaeological legacies, their interpretation is hardly independent of the period's overall picture. One fascinating source, although coming from a later age, from the earlier eighth century, is the imagery on Jug 2 of the treasure found at Sânnicolau Mare (Hung. Nagyszentmiklós, Romania), whose interpretation is fairly straightforward owing to its visual nature. One of the jug's medallions portrays a mounted warrior clad in his armour, alongside his vanquished foes. The man's face evokes the oriental traits of the Avars of Asian ancestry, while the facial features of the man he drags along by his hair are Slavic, and the head hung on the cantle is Germanic (*Fig. 39*).[146] The message conveyed by this image reflects a constructed reality as conceptualised and ambitioned by the patron. The one-time reality was far more complex. There is increasing evidence that the conquerors arriving from Asia and the communities subjugated by them had in part led their lives apart from each other, as eloquently illustrated by the strikingly richly furnished burials of various individuals and communities appearing in the Danube-Tisza interfluve in the seventh century. Genetic analyses have convincingly shown that these graves predominantly contained the interments of a population of eastern Asian stock,[147] the implication being that the Avar elite adhered to the traditional principles of empire-building employed in the east in their new homeland, too: they married among each other and lived apart from their subjects, who vastly outnumbered them, ensuring thereby the maintenance of their power. Even as late as the eighth century, we know of two separate cemeteries opened some 50 kilometres from the location where the Sânnicolau Mare/Nagyszentmiklós Treasure was concealed, one with burials predominantly representing a Mongolid community, the other with mostly Europid burials; the two burial grounds lay no more than 60 metres apart and were used during roughly the same period.[148] In Transdanubia, several burial grounds indicate that the steppean communities and the population groups integrated into the khaganate interred their deceased in the same location already during the first century of the Avar period, even if the grave groups of the families using the cemetery were initially spatially discrete.[149] Interments of individuals with Mongolid and Europid traits within the same Avar-period cemetery have been documented in other regions and periods of the Carpathian Basin, too.

The delicate internal balance constructed by Bayan from the 560s was disrupted with the collapse of the wealth extortion strategy in the later 620s, which had been highly effective for several decades. The system of dispensing subsidies that played a cardinal role in the creation and maintenance of the charismatic khagan's empire could no longer be sustained. Its pivotal role is amply reflected in the words of the khagan commemorated in the eighth-century Türk inscriptions (*Fig. 40*): "In order to nourish the people, I, with great armies, went on campaigns twelve times … After (that), since I had fortune and since I had the good luck—may Heaven be gracious!—… I furnished the naked people with clothes and I made the poor people rich and the few people numerous." Mention is also made of the indispensable role played by foreign commodities: "Since Heaven above

and Earth below were gracious (to me) … for the benefit of my Turks and my people I won and acquired their [i.e. the Chinese people's] yellow gold and white silver, their hemmed (?) silk cloth … their black sables and blue squirrels".[150]

The end to the successful campaigns by necessity meant a dwindle in the subsidies received by the lower-ranking leaders heading the groups who ensured the firm loyalty of the khagan's subjects. The sources fail to mention whether the khagan and the dynasty's charisma was called into question—yet, we know that this turn of events was inevitable in the empires of nomadic pastoralists.[151] Contemporaneous examples offer a fairly good idea of what happened when loyalty towards the khagan wavered among local leaders, who had until then accepted his supremacy. To cite yet another example from the Türks: when the Rouran khagan refused to marry off a Rouran princess to Bumin, his Türk subject performing important military service, his refusal set in motion a chain of events with far-reaching consequences for the empire. The Türk leader, who had little by little moved to attain greater independence for himself and had established independent trade relations with his Chinese neighbour, turned to the Western Wei Dynasty of China, which honoured his request and sent him a wife as a token of their alliance. The next year, Bumin openly rebelled against his khagan, toppled the Rouran Empire, and assumed the title of khagan, replacing his former lord with himself and his clan.[152] In other instances, although the dynasty was not removed, the ruler who could not boast military successes had, in the eyes of his subjects, lost the benevolence of Heaven and had to depart from among the living, as shown by the example of a fifth-century Rouran khagan, Tou-lun (r. 485–492), who fought a series of unsuccess-

Fig. 40. Kül tegin's inscription in the valley of the River Orkhon, Mongolia. Top: detail of the Türk runic inscription, bottom: frontal view of the stele with the Chinese text

ful battles against the Tiele tribes which had rebelled and fled westward to escape his rule. The khagan's subjects rose up against him and murdered him, then elected his uncle No-kai as their khagan (r. 492–506) who had successfully waged a war against the fugitives, because "the people of the land believed that No-kai enjoyed the benevolence of Heaven and they desired to make him their lord".[153]

Given the organisation of steppean empires and their mode of exercising power, it comes as no surprise that when the gold tribute from Constantinople was no longer sent, uprisings against the Avar khagan broke out simultaneously on both the western and eastern fringes of the khaganate. In the west, the Wend tribes led by Samo rebelled with support from the Franks and established their independence,[154] while in the east, Kuvrat, the leader of the communities speaking western Old Turkic tongues inhabiting the steppe north of the Black Sea, shook off the Avar yoke and drove away the khagan's men.[155] Some of the tribes—designated as Slavs in the sources—living along the northern and/or southern bank of the Lower Danube too believed their time had come.[156] The rebellion in the Carpathian Basin, a direct challenge to the khagan's power, posed an even greater threat than the secession of the khaganate's fringe areas and the ruptures in the Avar alliance system. According to a western chronicler, "there broke out a violent quarrel in the Pannonian kingdom of the Avars or Huns. The matter in dispute was the succession to the throne: should it be an Avar or a Bulgar? The forces of the two parties gathered together and there was a fight. In the end the Avars beat the Bulgars". Following their aborted bid for power, the rebels fled westward and sought shelter among the Bavarians.[157]

The chain of events after 626 clearly demonstrated that the extorted "financial support" was crucial to the Avar leadership, enabling it to distribute generous gifts for securing the loyalty of the peoples and smaller groups that had been subdued—it meant the mainstay of its power after establishing itself in Europe.[158] The break in the flow of gold was soon felt by the royal treasury, the main source of the subsidies dispensed by the patron to the clients,[159] and it inevitably fractured the leading group's power to some extent.

Fig. 41. Buckle and golden belt ornaments of the Kunágota burial, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

On the Road between Avaria and Constantinople: Dignitaries, Envoys, and Merchants

Seeing the immense amount of gold and other valuables flowing from Constantinople to the Avar lords as diplomatic gifts and in exchange for peace between the later 550s and the mid-620s, the question reasonably arises as to whether these riches are reflected in the archaeological record. It might seem surprising at first sight that very few of the articles that can be identified as definitely originating from Byzantium had conceivably been received as diplomatic gifts. In addition to the obvious, namely the gold coins (*Figs 8.2, 13, 19, 36, 38*), no more than a handful of truly magnificent and outstandingly valuable pieces spring immediately to mind. These include the silver plate (or, better said, one-third of a plate) bearing control stamps from the reign of Justinian found at Tépe (*Fig. 43*), the golden belt set (*Figs 41–42*) and gold casket mounts (*Fig. 8.1*) from the Kunágota burial, the buckle from Grave 1 of Kunbábony (*Fig. 45*), the belt fitting from Hatvan-Boldogi-puszta (*Fig. 44*), and the gold necklace and earrings of the Halič Treasure (Hung. Gács, Slovakia) (*Fig. 46*).[160] This seems rather meagre in the light of the seventy years of intense connections. Moreover, on the testimony of the current record, the majority of these articles were deposited after 626, after the breakdown of the khagans' wealth extortion strategy, a phenomenon that will be discussed at greater length in the last chapter. Now, let us address another question: what is the reason for the strikingly low number of finds that could, at least in theory, have been received as diplomatic gifts?

Fig. 42. Conjectural reconstruction of the belt adorned with the gold belt fittings made in the Byzantine style from Kunágota, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. The pattern of the overgarment was inspired by the period's Byzantine silks

Fig. 43. One-third of a silver plate with control stamps from Justinian I's reign from Tépe, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Fig. 44. Gold belt ornament in the Byzantine style from Hatvan-Boldogi-puszta, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Fig. 45. Gold buckle from Grave 1 of Kunbábony, Katona József Museum, Kecskemét

Fig. 46. Byzantine necklace and two pairs of gold earrings from the Halič Treasure (Hung. Gács), Slovakia, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Gifts in the written sources

To the good fortune of archaeological research, lists of the various objects presented to the Avars occupy a prominent place among the Eastern Roman literary sources recording diplomatic gifts.[161] As we have seen in the above, John of Ephesus speaks of gold, silver, garments, belts, and gold-ornamented saddles in his account of the first Avar embassy visiting Constantinople. Menander records that the gifts to the Avars borne by Valentinus included cords worked with gold, couches (*Fig. 47*), and silken garments. In his account of the events taking place a few years later, he speaks of the "usual gifts" received by the Avar envoys from Justinian such as "cords worked with gold which were made to confine what was escaping",[162] golden couches, and "other luxury goods". Narses, the envoy sent to the Avars by Tiberius II (r. 578–582) at the time of the siege of Sirmium, took with him a large sum of gold and "dresses in various materials" to be presented as gifts.[163]

The passages cited above clearly suggest that the Byzantines were quite knowledgeable about the kinds of gifts that would please the nomadic nobles. In addition to the gold and silver objects mentioned in general in these lists—which undoubtedly included substantial amounts of gold coins[164]—the barbarian elite apparently had a penchant for silken garments, gold costume accessories such as belts and jewellery, horse gear such as saddles, and ornate golden couches. The latter, perhaps a piece of foreign origin, also appears in the description of the Türk khagan's court. We know that Attila received the Eastern Roman envoys sitting on a couch (while the participants of the banquets were seated on chairs).[165] Describing the events of the 580s, Theophylact Simocatta records that the Avar khagan personally requested

Fig. 47. No ornate couches are currently known from this period. The depiction of Abraham's bed in a miniature of the sixth-century Vienna Genesis offers an idea of what a similar piece of furniture would have looked like.
Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Theol. gr. 31, Fol. 4v

an elephant and a golden couch from the Emperor Maurice. It is an entirely different matter that the lord of the Avars eventually returned "the ostentatious gold couch" and the exotic beast to the emperor after having received them.[166] The Constantinopolitan court was not the single one pestered by the barbarians, the Avars among them, with requests of this kind. During lower-level diplomatic contacts, when instead of envoys sent by the court, the negotiations were conducted by the military leaders guarding the borders or the local dignitaries of the provinces, mainly of the towns and cities (military commanders, bishops), the barbarian representatives often expressly spelled out what they expected in the way of gifts.[167] On one of these occasions, following the futile siege of Sirmium, Bayan demanded "some small gifts" in exchange for his withdrawal; allegedly, he "did not wish to receive much, no more than a silver plate, a small amount of gold and a Scythian tunic."[168] A few decades later, Theophylact Simocatta mentions that in addition to 2000 solidi, the Avar khagan besieging Singidunum received "a gold-inlaid table and clothing" from the defenders after lifting the siege,[169] while the Avar khagan laying siege to Tomis (modern Constanța in Romania) requested "Indian spices" from the commander defending the city. The Byzantine dignitary acquiesced to his request and "despatched pepper, the Indian leaf, cassia, and the thing called Saussurea".[170]

In addition to the observations made by their contemporaries, the Byzantines could also draw from their centuries-long diplomatic experience when selecting the appropriate gifts for the envoys of the delegations sent by various peoples. As we have seen, the Byzantine court drew up detailed lists, complete with valuations, of the gifts borne by foreign envoys (similarly as the Chinese emperors[171]). These lists, meticulously recorded and collected over a long period of time, were kept in the imperial chancery. Additional reports on the leaders of various peoples and the delegations sent by them as well as on their customs could be consulted in the *scrinium barbarorum*, the office responsible for the Empire's foreign affairs supervised by the *magister officiorum*, where the documents on the sums spent on diplomatic missions from the imperial treasury were housed,[172] and which probably also kept records on the requests and disbursements such as the ones made in the case of the Avars besieging Sirmium, Singidunum, and Tomis. Taking full advantage of a developed literacy, it was thus a relatively simple task to assemble a list of the items that had been presented as gifts to various delegations and their overlords on their last stop before arriving to Constantinople, at their lodgings in the imperial city, and on the occasion of their official audience. This is why on their first visit to Constantinople, the Avars—who were treated as if they had not been heard of before—were showered with gifts that were known to appeal to the taste and lifestyle of the nomadic dignitaries: gold, silver, garments, and gold-ornamented saddles. And this is how Constantinople learnt that couches, occupying a prominent place in Byzantine-Persian diplomatic relations, were highly desirable gifts in the eyes of nomadic rulers.[173] To be sure, the Avars could also personally admire couches of this type in the emperor's palace during their first visit to the imperial city. Equally importantly, nomadic rulers expected to receive the same type of lavish gifts as befitted the Persians, the highest-ranking partner in the eyes of the Eastern Roman court, always mindful of the prominence and status of the neighbouring peoples.[174]

Envoys, "shopping sprees", and the composition of the tribute

The sources at our disposal reveal that the Avars returned to their homeland laden not only with the articles that had been selected for them by the Byzantine officials. We know, for example, that in addition to the gifts received from the emperor, the members of the Avar delegation of 562 had "purchased whatever they required, both clothing and weaponry" during their stay in Byzantium (although the weapons were confiscated by their hosts before crossing the frontier owing to the export ban on them).[175] Another passage speaks of "silver" (probably various silver articles) among the goods with which the envoys set off for the homeward journey to the Carpathian Basin.[176] Targitios, Bayan's envoy sent to Constantinople before the siege of Sirmium, had taken the agreed annual tribute of 80,000 pieces of gold to the khagan not only in the form of solidi: the envoy departed from the Empire "with gold and merchandise which he had bought with some of the money".[177] It is also quite feasible that the Avar-Byzantine agreement on the amount of the annual tribute had *ab initio* stipulated that a certain portion of the negotiated amount would be delivered in the form of silk and other valuables. In the passages relating the negotiations during the siege of Sirmium, Menander lists "gold, silver and silken clothes" among the "gifts" sent to the Avars each year by the emperor.[178] Theophylact Simocatta recounts a similar practice when mentioning that in the early 580s, the Byzantines "agreed to deposit with the barbarians each year eight thousand gold coins in the form of merchandise of silver and of embroidered cloths".[179] Regrettably, we know nothing about exchange rates. We do know, however, that in the later sixth century, the widow of a high-ranking dignitary donated to the Church "all her husband's splendid clothes, great cloaks of pure silk and raw silk garments, with colours and pictures, and the other clothes of high price" (*Fig. 48*). These were each valued at 72 solidi. A few decades later, a local landowner in Alexandria donated a silk coverlet valued at 36 solidi to the city's bishop.[180] Thus, it would hardly be surprising if garments made of pure silk had arrived by the hundreds to Avaria each year.

The sources thus indicate that the Avar delegations travelling to the Eastern Roman lands and the envoys sent to collect the annual tribute had purchased a wide array of Byzantine products, in part paid for from their own pockets and in part from the "state" coffers, and that a part of the annual tribute had been sent in kind. Of the many insights that can be drawn from this phenomenon, a single one will be highlighted here, namely that the above would shed light on the origins of one portion of the Eastern Roman-type artefacts recovered from Avar-period burials and on how they could have reached the Carpathian Basin, particularly if we consider that the Avars could well have acquired articles other than luxury commodities in this manner. One insight is provided by the example of the Crimean Tartar envoys travelling to the Vienna court in the last third of the seventeenth century. The period between 1666 and 1683 saw "a steady stream of embassies. A Tartar delegation, sometimes even two, travelled to the imperial court each year." A closer look at the relevant records reveals that "the genuine purpose of the diplomatic missions was trade. Since the envoys were permitted to take all commodities without having to pay customs or other duties, the envoys exploited this possibility to the full." Moreover, "the carefully preserved registers reveal that fine steel wares, mainly knives, scissors, needles, and thimbles

Fig. 48. Silk fragments from Grave 218 of the Antinoopolis B cemetery in Middle Egypt, late fifth–earlier sixth century, Musée des Tissus, Lyon

for satisfying quotidian needs, were purchased in bulk and were then transported in barrels. … The other group of commodities represented luxury items such as fine Dutch cloths, Venetian mirrors, golden threads, trimmings, and braids."[181]

We should thus not lose sight of the fact that diplomacy, trade, and war were inextricably intertwined and that the majority of the Eastern Roman-type artefacts reaching the Avar lands could have been acquired though any one channel of this intricate system. The envoys despatched on a single mission could return with articles received as diplomatic gifts, various items purchased in marketplaces, and commodities that were part of the annual tribute, which could variously include precious metal and copper-alloy articles, silk, and finely woven linen garments. Although the exact number of embassies sent to the imperial city remains unknown, we can

assume one every two or three years during the first decade of Avar-Byzantine relations. Their number undoubtedly increased during the ensuing six decades: envoys were sent every year to collect the tribute during the period of successful wealth extortion. In times of war, truce and peace negotiations both called for diplomatic missions, often involving repeated journeys to each other's lands by the envoys of both parties. Even if the Avar envoys were not required to travel to Constantinople on each occasion, they did have to set foot on Roman soil.

Gifts in the sources and in the Avar material record

The Mediterranean products mentioned in the texts cited in the foregoing include several types, which, although they had doubtless reached Avaria, left few traces in the archaeological record and can only be discovered with extraordinary luck. While some of the highly valued silken garments regularly mentioned in the accounts were in all likelihood worn to the grave, they disintegrated during the subsequent centuries in the soil of the Carpathian Basin. It is nevertheless surprising that not even small scraps have survived, even more so, because quite a few remnants of similar clothing have been preserved among the finds of the Hungarian Conquest period dating

Fig. 49. Delicate gold strips once sewn onto a precious textile, Kiskőrös-Vágóhíd, Grave VIIIA.
1. Conjectural reconstruction of how the gold strips had been secured.
2. One possible pattern (graphics and reconstruction: Zsóka Varga). 3. The gold strips, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

from some three centuries later. Although the burial customs of the two periods share numerous similarities, one possible reason for this divergence can probably be sought in the different types of metal costume accessories—on which textile remains are most often preserved—used for embellishing funerary garments. Quite similarly, traces of the silk garments presented to the Kutrigurs around the mid-sixth century mentioned in the Byzantine literary sources are also lacking from the sixth-century burials of the Eastern European steppe. Nevertheless, we can expect the discovery of Avar-period silk remains. Until then, the one-time presence of silk can perhaps be surmised among the burials yielding delicate gold strips that had once been woven into or had adorned the valuable textiles (*Fig. 49*).[182]

Although golden couches could theoretically have been occasionally deposited into the burials of the khaganate's uppermost elite, no finds have yet been published suggesting that pieces of Mediterranean origin had actually been placed into graves. In the case of spices obtained from Eastern Roman lands, only the containers used for their storage would be recovered from burials—if they had accompanied the dead at all. However, the one-time contents of these vessels can only be determined with exceptional luck. It has been suggested, for example, that the amphora found in Grave 1 at Kunbábony (*Fig. 50*) could have contained some rare fragrant substance such as incense or myrrh, or spices that had been sent to the Avar leader.[183] A few glass vessels of Mediterranean origin may have once been used for storing aromatic oils (*Fig. 51*). Yet, the handful of amphorae in which wine, oil, or other products had been transported and stored, and the few glass vessels that had perhaps contained wine or perfumes hardly do justice to the decades-long connections reported in the written sources.[184] At the same time, the fragments of some twenty amphorae brought to light on the Kölked settlement, whose significance eclipses by far most of the period's currently known similar sites, is a clear indication that a prominent family and its immediate milieu had access to these goods more regularly and in greater number, even if they did not necessarily maintain any contact, official or other, with the imperial centre.[185]

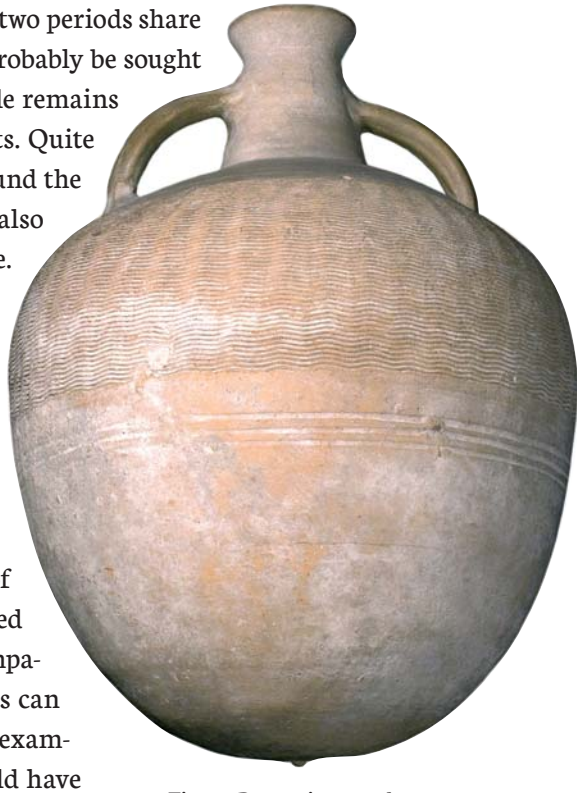


Fig. 50. Byzantine amphora from Grave 1 of Kunbábony, Katona József Museum, Kecskemét

Fig. 51. Glass vessel suitable for storing aromatic oil from Grave 517 of the Zamárdi cemetery, Rippl-Rónai Municipal Museum, Kaposvár

The fewer than one hundred gold coins minted before 626 recovered from secure Avar-period contexts represent but a fraction of the immense amount of gold once reaching the Avars, even if, as we have seen in the above, the relevant sources clearly state that a part of the roughly 6.3 million solidi paid out to the Avars during the decades of wealth extortion quite certainly did not reach the Carpathian Basin in the form of coins. Nevertheless, the number and distribution of the known coin finds correlate well with the dynamics of the growing amount of the gold tribute mentioned in the sources (*Fig. 52*), reflecting that despite their minimal number, there was probably no major change in the proportion of the tribute disbursed in gold coins between 574 and 626, with the possible exception of the last decade.[186]

Unlike the gift types recorded in the written accounts and briefly discussed in the above, which rarely survived amidst the climatic conditions of the Carpathian Basin and owing to the burial customs of the Avar-period population, the exact opposite is true of the belt sets mentioned in various passages. Belts adorned with metal mounts are expressly widespread in the male burials of the Early and Middle Avar period, attested in 15 to 20% of the burials.[187] Two well-discernible traditions can be noted regarding the buckles for fastening the belt and the various decorative fittings secured to it. To make an intricate picture very simple: the first type shares strong affinities with the Merovingian West, Italy, and Central Europe, while the other type points towards the Eastern Roman lands and the regions east of the Carpathians. The former were principally, although not exclusively, popular in Transdanubia, the latter can be found in the entire region ruled by the Avars, although the proportions vary from one area to the next. In the early period, belt fittings with direct or indirect Eastern Roman affinities dominated in the Danube-Tisza interfluve, a region mostly occupied by the Avars, and in the

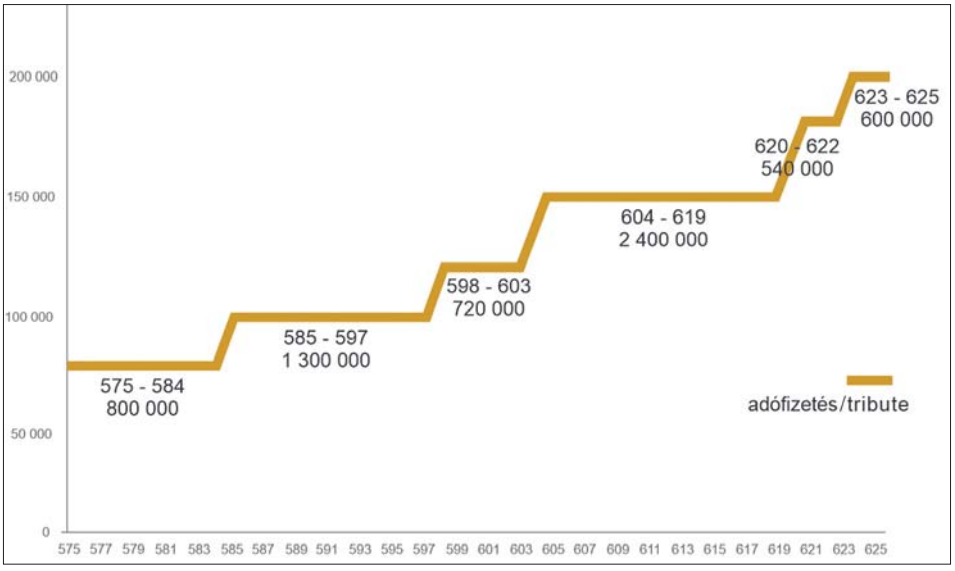


Fig. 52. The increase in the value of the Byzantine gold tribute expressed in solidi between 574/575 and 626, based on Péter Somogyi's estimates and his chart

Fig. 53. Openwork ("mask-style") belt and shoe mounts from the Carpathian Basin: 1. Klárafalva B cemetery, Grave 60, Móra Ferenc Museum, Szeged. 2. Szekszárd-Bogyiszlói út, Grave 314, Wosinsky Mór County Museum, Szekszárd. 3–4. Hajdúszoboszló, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Tisza region, settled by the Eastern European pastoralist peoples. In eastern Transdanubia, however, the proportions are far more balanced. In any case, this should not be taken to imply that the majority of the buckles and belt fittings with Eastern Roman affinities were actually produced in workshops located in the Empire. To the contrary: there is a general scholarly consensus that the greater part of these articles was crafted locally, even more so, because sets of goldsmithing tools used in their production are known from the Carpathian Basin.[188] The number of decorative belt sets that in all likelihood reached the Carpathian Basin from Eastern Roman lands is relatively low in the currently known material record.

Looking at the Avar-period material culture, it would appear that the currently known corpus of belt fittings reveals more about the impact the Byzantine-style belt sets acquired in Eastern Roman lands had in their new cultural milieu, than about the actual belts received as diplomatic gifts, or purchased in Roman lands, or

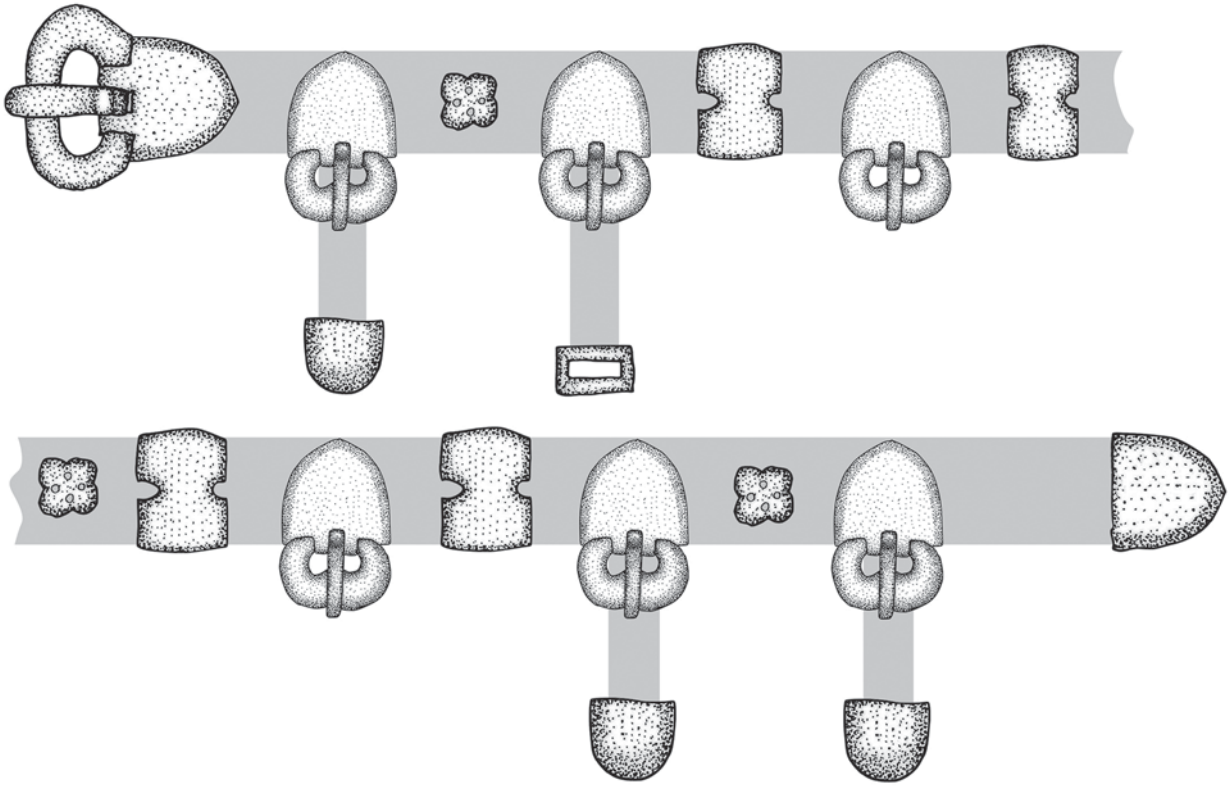


Fig. 54. Reconstruction of how buckles secured to belts as belt fittings were worn, mid-sixth century, Altynasar, Grave 39, Kazakhstan

obtained as part of the tribute. In other words, the Byzantine artefacts reaching Avaria *created a fashion*, whose style—or, better said, successive style trends—was also adopted by those who did not have the opportunity to procure original pieces for themselves. This is hardly surprising: the fashion inspired by Eastern Roman belt fittings in the mid- and later sixth century can also be studied in the archaeological record of the Eastern European steppe. Simultaneously with their appearance in the Eastern Roman lands, openwork belt fittings, usually designated as mask or Martinovka-type mounts in archaeological scholarship, are also attested north of the Empire's Eastern European frontier, where a wide variety of belt mounts and shoe mounts decorated in an identical manner were made, illustrating how the "mask style" was transformed to suit regional tastes (*Fig. 53*). Some of the Sasanian and Eastern Roman buckles reaching the Eastern European and Asian steppe were used in an even more curious manner: instead of fastening belts around the waist, they first functioned as buckles for side-straps and later as purely decorative elements secured to the belt (*Fig. 54*), leading to the appearance of the so-called pseudo-buckles, which became highly popular belt accessories for over a century (*Fig. 55*).[189]

Fig. 55. Selection of the pressed pseudo-buckles and other belt ornaments of the belt set from Maglód, earlier seventh century, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Fig. 56. Byzantine-style belt set made in the Carpathian Basin from the burial uncovered in Kecskemét-Sallai utca, Katona József Museum, Kecskemét

Fig. 57. Byzantine-style belt set made in the Carpathian Basin and Byzantine amphora from the burial uncovered at Dány, Petőfi Public Museum Collection, Aszód

One striking feature of the Early and Middle Avar-period find material is that some of the individuals identified as standing on one of the higher rungs of the social ladder[190] were not sent off on their last journey with belt ornaments made in Eastern Roman workshops, even if their belt sets were made in the Byzantine style (*Figs 56–57*). One explanation would be to assume that the mount-ornamented belts received as Eastern Roman gifts by the highest echelons of the khaganate were not distributed among the lower-standing social groups exactly because these articles signalled a prominent position within Avar society. However, it is equally feasible that a dignitary had several ceremonial belts and that the one chosen for the funeral from the family treasury was not necessarily the most valuable piece, particularly if it had been conferred on him when he was installed into some high office during his lifetime.[191] This would have been a major consideration even if the office was not hereditary within the family: the erstwhile high position and its symbol doubtless continued to enhance the descendants' prestige. It must also be borne in mind that the burials of the men making up the highest leadership of Avar society in the Carpathian Basin before the 620s–630s are not known.

Whichever the case, if belt sets made in the Byzantine style were worn by the khagan and his milieu, this very fact could have been sufficient for creating a fashion for them. They served as models for the dignitaries who strove to express their social position and their proximity to the khagan and his power through their costume, and who thus commissioned the manufacture of these pieces by local goldsmiths.

Byzantine and Byzantine-style artefacts in the Avar-period material record

The geographic distribution of the article types identified as made in the Byzantine or, more generally, in the Mediterranean style within the Carpathian Basin indicates that they were exceedingly popular in southern Transdanubia and, although to a lesser extent, in eastern Transdanubia, too, during the first half-century of the Avar period. Many were recovered from burial grounds in which groups with a Roman cultural tradition also interred their dead. While it would be quite feasible that a part of these articles had arrived as gifts from Byzantine lands or had been purchased there and then taken back to the Carpathian Basin, their archaeological contexts do not explicitly support this option. Moreover, the analogies to several of these Mediterranean-type finds point towards Italy, drawing attention to trade connections in the traditional sense and the dynamic relations maintained with the Langobards.

The mediums of creative imitation: Jewellery and costume accessories

Jewellery such as earrings and finger-rings as well as various other costume accessories such as pins and brooches for fastening garments (*Fig. 58*) and stylus pins for creating and enhancing elaborate coiffures and for securing veils are amply represented among the article types with Mediterranean affinities that are principally attested in Transdanubia.[192] The exact counterparts of several of these pieces—among which copper-alloy articles are quite frequent—are known from the Eastern Roman lands, suggesting that some had reached the Carpathian Basin from that region. In contrast, costume accessories with Mediterranean affinities, but without close parallels in the Eastern Roman core territories, occur in higher proportion in the Danube-Tisza interfluve and the territories east of the Tisza. Their formal traits indicate that certain elements of the Mediterranean prototypes had been altered to suit local tastes, suggesting that they had been made locally.

Typical examples include earrings with pyramidal sheet metal pendants decorated with granulation (*Fig. 59.3–4*),[193] whose formal models appear in

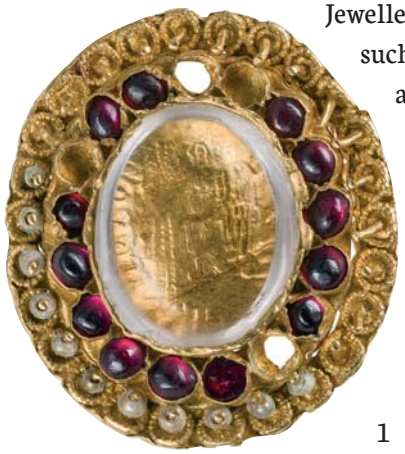


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Fig. 58. Mediterranean-style disc brooches from the Keszthely-Fenékpuszta-Horreum cemetery, Balaton Museum, Keszthely. 1. Gold brooch inlaid with pearls, garnets, and a rock crystal from Grave 8. 2. Box brooch with sunken centre depicting the Adoration of the Cross by two angels from Grave 14

the southerly areas of the Crimea and the northern Balkanic territories under Byzantine rule until the first decade of the seventh century (*Fig. 59.1–2*). However, the latter are usually smaller than the pieces popular east of the Danube during the Avar period, while their raw material was in the majority of the known cases of lower value compared to the golden earrings produced in Avaria. With their larger size and gold raw material, the Avar-period exemplars, as well as their counterparts in the Black Sea region, were the products of a cultural milieu that enjoyed easy access to this precious metal, but whose taste apparently differed from that of Eastern Roman urban culture in many respects.

One weak point of the above line of reasoning is that similarly to several other jewellery types of the Early and Middle Avar period inspired by Mediterranean prototypes, earrings with pyramidal sheet metal pendants do not have any close precious metal parallels from secure contexts in the central Eastern Roman lands. One reason for this could well be that finely crafted precious metal pieces had simply not been produced in this region; an alternative explanation is that either articles of this type have not yet come to light in that region owing to the extensive destruction and the often poor archaeological coverage of the Mediterranean sites, or that they have not been published so far (judging from the occurrence of comparable pieces in the Crimea, the northern Balkans, and the Carpathian Basin, the discovery of similar exemplars can be expected in Anatolia). One point that nevertheless emerges clearly is that the goldsmiths catering to the needs of the Early and Middle Avar-period population of the Carpathian Basin transformed their models to suit local tastes, demands, and purchasing power.

Unlike the previous earring type, an unprovenanced seventh-century pair of gold earrings (*Fig. 61.1*) offers a fascinating insight into the process of how sophisticated models were translated into simpler forms through creative imitation. Its local production is suggested by the fact that it was made of pressed

Fig. 59. Earrings with pyramidal pendant from the Carpathian Basin and their Mediterranean models. 1. Gold pendant with pearl bead from an earring or jewelled collar, sixth century, Salona, Croatia, Arheološki Muzej u Splitu. 2. Antimony earring, Piatra Frecăţei (ancient Beroe), Romania, Grave B.133, later sixth century. 3. Szegvár-type earring, Üllő, earlier seventh century, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. 4. Szentendre-type gold earring, Alibunar (Hung. Alibunár), Serbia, initial two thirds of the seventh century, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Fig. 60. Pair of earrings and a pendant in the form of peacocks from a Byzantine workshop. Ferrell Collection, Kansas City

Fig. 61. 1. Pair of gold earrings, unprovenanced. Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. 2. Bronze die from Grave 28 of the Tiszafüred-Majoros cemetery, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

sheet gold and then fitted with tiny bells as well as by a die for a similar, although somewhat simpler earring from Grave 28 of the Tiszafüred-Majoros cemetery (*Fig. 61.2*). The magnificent, elegant model of the earring is known from the Ferrell Collection (*Fig. 60*), which also offers an idea of what types of articles we should be looking for in the Avar-period material record in order to confidently claim that we have identified a piece received by the Avars as an imperial gift. The glass(?)-inlaid silver medallion from Hajdúszoboszló (*Fig. 63.1*) and its parallels represent another case in point: these pieces were doubtless inspired by golden Eastern Roman necklaces such as the one with onyx-inlaid pendants found at Mihaelsfeld (today known as Dzhiginka) in the Lower Kuban region (*Fig. 62*), whose craftsmanship and value rank it among the sorts of gifts presented

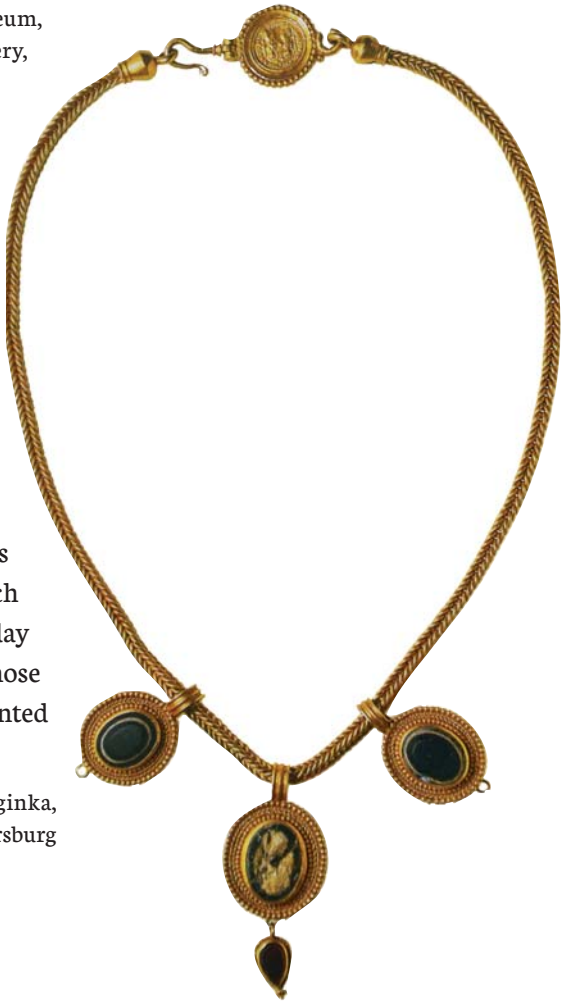

Fig. 62. Gold necklace with medallions from a burial at Dzhiginka, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Fig. 63. 1. Silver medallion, originally inlaid with glass (?) from Hajdúszoboszló, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. 2. Glass-inlaid medallions, originally the pendants of a necklace, made in the Carpathian Basin, Deszk D cemetery, Grave 31, Móra Ferenc Museum, Szeged

by Byzantium to her northern neighbours. In addition to the Hajdúszoboszló pendant and its close parallels from Szegvár-Oromdűlő, both strongly echoing their earlier golden models, larger pressed variants are also known from the cemeteries used during the first century of the Avar period in the southerly areas of the Tisza region (*Fig 63.2*), whose simple manufacturing technique made these pieces affordable for the less affluent, enabling them to adopt the fashion created by the more elaborate necklaces. The larger size of the pendants made them more eye-catching, a nod to the taste of the population of the Carpathian Basin.[194]

With their outstanding craftsmanship and high aesthetic value, the earrings and pendants of the Ferrell Collection and the Mihaelsfeld necklace are not the single exquisitely made pieces produced for the imperial aristocracy, many of which reach museum collections from Byzantine lands.[195] They deserve our attention because this exceptional quality is rarely encountered among the finds from the Carpathian Basin. When it is attested, it is often represented by artefacts whose fine workmanship is the principal indication that they had perhaps been produced outside the Carpathian Basin. Good examples include the belt sets with gold pseudo-buckles dated to the middle third of the seventh century (*Fig. 64*). While these magnificent pieces, with their identical construction and complex manufacturing procedure, certainly reflect the sophisticated goldsmithing techniques employed in

the creation of Byzantine goldwork, the use of pseudo-buckle-type mounts was typical for the Eurasian, and particularly the Eastern European steppe from the later sixth century, suggesting that they had initially appeared in this extensive geographical region (*Fig. 54*). It seems likely that the magnificent, finely crafted gold versions current in the middle decades of the seventh century were the late descendants of these earlier pieces, "translated" into the exceptionally finely made mounts befitting the crème de la crème of steppe society.[196]

There can be no doubt that the khagan's court was in the position of employing goldsmiths who had mastered the metalworking skills of the Eastern Roman world. The captives taken by the Avars in the Byzantine lands, repeatedly mentioned in the written sources, could well have included skilled goldsmiths. Even though no explicit mention is made of goldsmiths in the Avars' case, there are, for example, several references to how the thirteenth-century Mongols knowingly sought out the craftsmen among their captives and how they employed them in their own service. Goldsmiths trained in the Eastern Roman tradition can also be sought among the craftsmen who willingly threw in their lot with the Avars and tried their luck in the service of Avar dignitaries. Evidence for Sogdian craftsmen working for the Türks can be found in the written sources and the archaeological record alike. The eighth-century Türk runic inscriptions also record that at the khagan's request, the Chinese emperor sent masons, stone-cutters, and painters to the lord of the Türks. In fact, architectural and various other decorative elements made by craftsmen from the imperial Chinese workshop were identified among the relics found during the archaeological investigation of the memorial monuments built in the precinct where the inscriptions were also erected. Chinese chronicles also note that a Rouran khagan of the fifth century asked the emperor to send him craftsmen, weavers and brocade-makers among them. Neither did Bayan shy away from requests of this kind: he turned to Justin II to provide him with craftsmen skilled in construction work for building a palace and a bath. The Mongols often transplanted entire craft communities in the thirteenth century in order to organise as well as to transform craft production serving the needs of the empire's lords.[197]

Whichever the case, one particular pseudo-buckle belt set of the Carpathian Basin eclipses by far the other sets in its reflection of the Eastern Roman taste, namely the set of belt ornaments found at Divoš (Hung. Diós) near Sirmium in Serbia (*Figs 65–66*).[198] Although much more finely made with attention to the most minute details, the structure of the mounts is identical to the exemplars of the other known sets. However, the form and decorative elements of the buckle and large strap-end—and particularly the enamelling, a unique decorative mode in an Avar context—evoke the belts worn by the period's Byzantine aristocracy. Its very fine proportions are again closer to the taste of the contemporaneous Mediterranean world than to the mounts adorned with large granulation from the Danube-Tisza interfluve. In the light of the above, it seems conceivable that the goldsmith who made the Divoš belt set should in this particular case be sought in the Eastern Roman lands and that the set had been a gift sent to one of the Avar dignitaries. Yet, why would the Byzantines have gone out of their way to please their sworn enemy by sending a belt set made in the steppean taste so popular among the Avars? Knowing the reciprocity of gift exchanges, it seems possible that this set, adapted to the Avar taste, was modelled on the mounts of a belt brought to Constantinople as a gift by the khagan's envoys during an earlier

Fig. 64. One possible reconstruction of how the belt from Grave 1 of Kunbábony studded with pseudo-buckles was worn, Katona József Museum, Kecskemét

Fig. 65. Belt set with pseudo-buckle mounts from Divoš (Hung. Diós) near Sirmium (Sremska Mitrovica), Serbia, Muzej Srema, Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia

Fig. 66. Belt set with pseudo-buckle mounts from Divoš (Hung. Diós) near Sirmium (Sremska Mitrovica), Serbia, Muzej Srema, Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia

diplomatic mission. Obviously, this is no more than speculation, and can hardly be substantiated by the currently available evidence. A conclusive answer, as so oft-times in archaeological scholarship, can only be expected from the future discovery of new finds.

Glass and metal vessels

Identifying the archaeological imprints of the highest level of connections between the peoples of the khaganate and the Eastern Roman world does not only pose problems in the case of jewellery and belt fittings that were extensively copied and creatively transformed. With the exception of the Tépe plate (*Fig. 43*) and the Budakalász jug (*Fig. 67*), the metal vessels brought to light from the burials of the Early Avar period can hardly be called masterpieces of metalwork. Most could have been acquired from the residence of a provincial Balkanic noble or from the plunder of a church or a town. This does not exclude the possibility that one or another copper-alloy jug, bucket, or bowl had reached its owner living in the Carpathian Basin as a smaller gift or had been purchased in the Empire. Only in a few cases does the archaeological context of the burials suggest that as prominent members of their community, the deceased could have had acquired these goods from distant lands (*Fig. 68*), although this could easily be a misperception, given that the period's burials were often plundered. The pieces found in the graves of a community's leading family raise the possibility that some of the copper-alloy vessels had been acquired through one of the "official" channels of Eastern Roman diplomacy—but neither can we exclude the possibility that these artefacts had been among the wares offered for sale by merchants arriving from the Eastern Roman lands or Italy. One point that does emerge clearly is that the copper-alloy metal vessels of Mediterranean origin dating from the Early Avar period are usually recovered from the burials of communities whose members had been found in the region by the Avars upon their arrival. It was customary among these communities to deposit similar articles in the grave well before the Avar conquest.[199]

As has already been noted in the foregoing, we have no way of knowing even from the general biography outlined by an article's archaeological context how exactly its last owner and his or her family had acquired some less than usual or more valuable, but hardly superb pieces. It seems prudent to resist all-encompassing explanations because life in the past was all too colourful and diverse. Some pieces were received as gifts either in

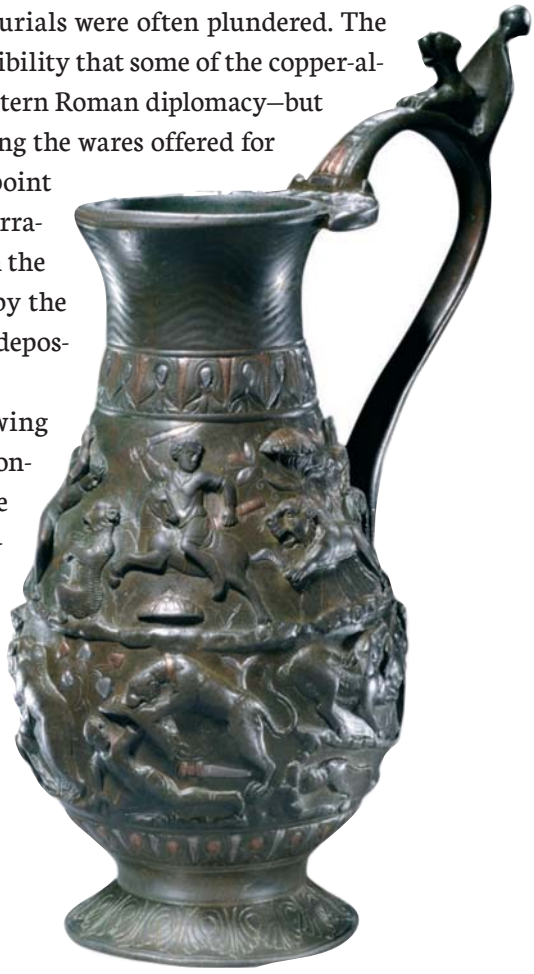

Fig. 67. Late antique brass jug from Grave 740 of the Budakalászi cemetery, Ferenczy Museum, Szentendre

Fig. 68. Late antique brass jug, Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery B, Grave 137, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

foreign lands, or in Avaria through the redistributive system of the Avar communities, depending on a momentary situation or on social status, others were purchased, while others still were obtained as war booty. Even more caution must be exercised in the case of objects reaching museums as stray finds such as the cast copper-alloy lamp from Tápiógyörgye (*Fig. 69*). Although it could be assumed that it had once illuminated (or merely adorned) the home of a wealthy noble with good foreign connections,[200] it could equally well have been acquired during one of the Balkanic campaigns and then carried back to the Carpathian Basin.

The glass vessels acquired by the Avar-period inhabitants of the Carpathian Basin represent an entirely different case. They were hardly seen as luxury wares in the Mediterranean world and some no doubt reached the khaganate owing to their one-time contents. The small glass bottles (*unguentaria*) from Jászapati and Zamárdi (*Fig. 51*) had perhaps originally been used for storing and transporting perfumed oil or spices, even if their contents could have differed when placed in the grave.[201] Knowing the khagan's request for Indian spices during the siege of Tomis, their presence comes as no surprise. The other glass wares such as drinking horns (*Figs 71.2, 73.1*), goblets (*Figs 71.1, 74.1*), jugs and pitchers, juglets (*Fig. 70*) and flasks[202] can in all likelihood be associated with wine or, to a lesser extent, oil consumption, as can some of the amphorae reaching Avaria. The glass wares recovered from Avar-period burials could have been quite easily obtained within the Empire or even from Italy, where they were not particularly valuable merchandise, unlike in Avaria, where—in the lack of local glass vessel production—these pieces had to be procured from foreign lands, which doubtless enhanced their value. Their one-time distribution can currently only be reconstructed from the burial assemblages, in which they are rare finds.

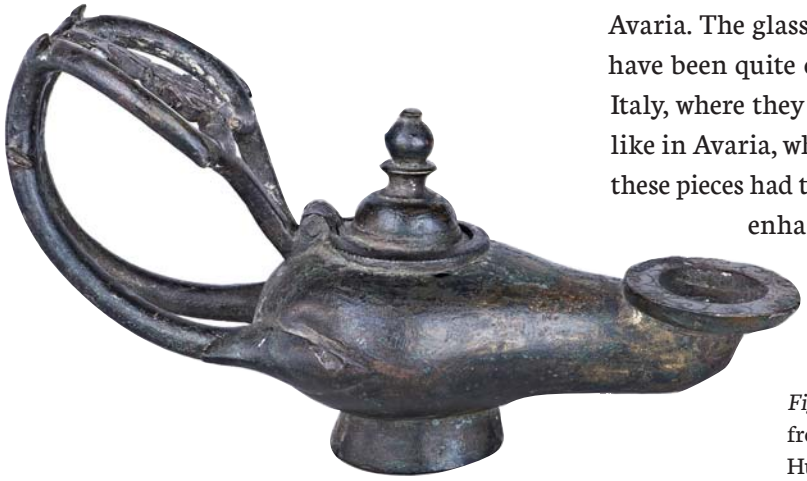

Fig. 69. Mediterranean copper-alloy lamp from Tápiógyörge, sixth to seventh century, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

A conclusive answer to whether this is an accurate reflection of the reality of the past or merely of burial customs can only be gained from the excavation of settlements resembling the Kölked site, occupied by the period's more affluent communities.

Similarly to copper-alloy vessels, glassware is generally found in the eastern and southern Transdanubian cemeteries used by communities which occasionally interred their dead with glass goblets well before the arrival of the Avars. These glass products were procured from the same sources as previously: in part from the west, mainly from Italy.[203] The final third of the seventh century saw the appearance of new glass types, namely goblets and drinking horns with trailed decoration.[204] One good example is Grave 47 of the Kisköre cemetery that yielded both a glass drinking horn and a glass goblet (*Fig. 71*). The joint occurrence of these two types—although not of their glass variants—has been documented earlier, too, for example in the richly furnished burials of the middle third of the seventh century such as Bócsa, which yielded precious metal exemplars (*Figs 72, 74.2*).[205] The assemblages with glass exemplars can be assigned to the same chronological horizon as the ones from Szeged-Átokháza and Ozora with silver drinking horns and goblets, as can the glass drinking horn and silver goblet found together in Grave IV of Kiskőrös-Vágóhíd.[206] Although these pieces were all deposited after the

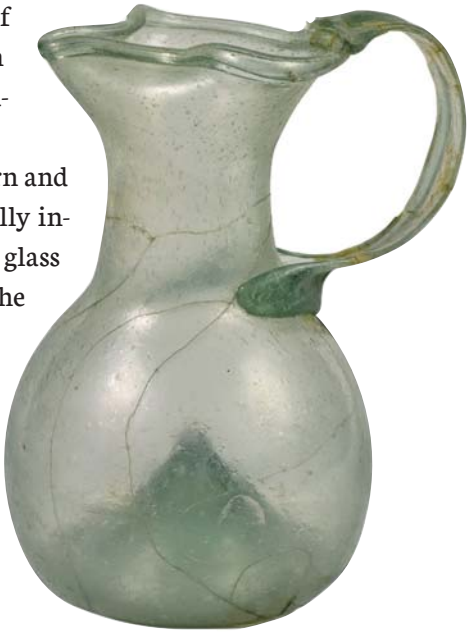

Fig. 70. Glass juglet from Grave 221 of the Zamárdi cemetery, Rippl-Rónai Municipal Museum, Kaposvár

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Fig. 71. Glass goblet and glass drinking horn, Kisköre-Halastó, Grave 47, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Fig. 72. Drinking horn with gold mounts from the lavishly furnished Bócsa burial, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Fig. 73. 1. Glass drinking horn from Srbobran (Hung. Bácsszenttamás), Serbia, Senta Municipal Museum, Senta. 2. Gold drinking horn from Grave 1 of Kunbábony, Katona József Museum, Kecskemét

Fig. 74. 1. Glass goblet from Grave 367 of the Zamárdi cemetery, Rippl-Rónai Municipal Museum, Kaposvár. 2. Gold goblet from the lavishly furnished Bócsa burial, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. 3. Glass goblet from Badari, Middle Egypt, British Museum, London. 4. Silver goblet from the Kunágota burial, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

intense phase of Eastern Roman-Avar connections lasting up to 626, there are some indications that glass vessels resembling the golden drinking horns and goblets of the elite burials dating from the middle third of the seventh century had already appeared at an earlier date in the Carpathian Basin, even if they were not deposited together (*Figs 73.1, 74.1*).[207] It is not self-evident that glass wares, which were highly affordable in the regions where they were produced, had possibly had an impact on precious metal vessels. In fact, the exact opposite holds true in the majority of the cases: cheaper imitations of the expensive precious metal vessels were usually made from less valuable glass that could be aesthetically worked. Nevertheless, a reverse impact cannot be rejected out of hand in regions where glass vessels were rare commodities that could only be procured through long-distance contacts (*Figs 73–74*). Even more so because glassware played an important role in feasting, a highly prominent arena of social interactions. Obviously, the similar objects of the Mediterranean world could have exercised a direct impact on the forms of the precious metal vessels of the Carpathian Basin and, given that few of the latter have survived, their one-time forms can perhaps be conjectured from their glass counterparts.[208]

The Avar-period elite as reflected by its burials

It has been repeatedly mentioned in the foregoing that there are surprisingly few objects in the archaeological record of the first half of the Avar rule in the Carpathian Basin that could be reasonably regarded as having been gifts presented to the Avar elite from the Eastern Roman lands. A few finds that could be assigned to this category were mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Together with a few other previously already discussed articles, most of these were recovered from a handful of seventh-century burials. One is the grave assemblage from Kunágota. The solidus of Justinian, the gold pendant set with smoky opal and the other pendants, the gold sheets once adorning a casket decorating the sword, and the cross-ornamented strap-slider of the gold belt fittings fashioned individually in the Byzantine style (*Figs 8, 41–42, 80.2*)[209] all suggest that the deceased had access to good-quality articles made in Byzantium, even if not to the most magnificent ones. The same holds true for the gold articles recovered from the three Ozora burials: the golden belt mounts, the amethyst pendants, the gold crosses, the gold finger-rings, the gold bulla on the twisted gold torc (*Figs 75–76*), the pair of gold brooches, and a solidus of Constantine IV minted between 669 and 674 found in the male and the two female burials.[210]

In fact, it is not entirely impossible that some of these finds were not genuine Eastern Roman products, but merely copies made in the Carpathian Basin. The belt fittings and the amethyst pendants from Ozora are highly instructive in this regard. Based on the proportions and craftsmanship of the former, the pieces of this set might well be seen as a case of creative imitation. Yet, we know that less finely crafted articles were also produced and sold on the markets of the Eastern Roman Empire. For example, the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* written during the reign of Heraclius indicates that a prostitute working in an Anatolian village could purchase a belt adorned with gold mounts for her son without much ado in the sixth and seventh centuries.[211] The belt fittings and gold

Fig. 75. Gold belt set from the male burial of Ozora, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Fig. 76. Gold cross and gold cross fragment, gold bulla, gold leaf-shaped pendant, and the amethyst pendants of a pair of earrings or jewelled collar from the female burials of Ozora, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Fig. 77. Byzantine necklace with a gold cross and two gold bullae, unprovenanced, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, München

Fig. 78. Byzantine necklace with gold cross, gold medallions, and gold leaf-shaped pendant from the Mersin Treasure, Mersin, Turkey, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

crosses from Ozora could well have originated from a similar provincial, or at least non-imperial source. It must nevertheless be borne in mind that although the amethyst pendants had probably adorned the buried woman's coiffure or her headdress,[212] they had originally most likely been parts of earrings or a jewelled collar.[213] The conical pendants were added after the reworking of the original piece. The golden jewellery and other articles of the women interred in the Ozora burials include several items that might have been parts of one and the same piece of jewellery before their refashioning. In view of their parallels (*Figs 77–78*), the cylindrical gold bullae, the leaf-shaped pendant, and the crosses could have originally adorned a golden necklace resembling the one from Halič (Hung. Gács, Slovakia: *Fig. 46*).

Aside from Ozora and Kunágota, the number of sixth- and seventh-century grave assemblages with unique and/or finely made pieces of Mediterranean origin is not particularly high. These include the princely burial from Kunbábony with its belt buckle (*Fig. 45*) and Late Roman 2B-type amphora (*Fig. 50*), the very fragmentary assemblage from Tépe with the silver plate (*Fig. 43*), and the gold collar with its garnet pendants (*Fig. 79.2*), the

Fig. 79. Pair of earrings and necklace from Grave VIIIA of Kiskőrös-Vágóhíd, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

expensive textile decorated with gold strips (*Fig. 49*), and the earrings (*Fig. 79.1*) from Grave VIIIA of Kiskőrös-Vágóhíd.[214] One shared trait of these assemblages, assigned to the category of elite "princely burials", is that they all date from the second and final third of the seventh century, as does the overwhelming majority of the burials that stand out by the finely made or more unusual articles of Mediterranean origin, even if their concentration is not as obvious. They were deposited at a time when, although fitting in nicely with previous exchanges of this type as well as with the period's general diplomatic practice, there is but a single lone reference to the Avars' diplomatic relations with Byzantium.[215] The inflow of Byzantine gold disbursed for political and diplomatic reasons to the Avars came to a standstill for some thirty years during this same period (between 626 and *ca.* 650), and then commenced again from the early 650s until the earlier 680s on the testimony of the numismatic record

(which again falls largely silent from the 680s).[216] The small silver bowl from Zemianský Vrbovok (Hung. Nemesvarbók, Slovakia) containing Byzantine silver coins falls into this period and it has been persuasively argued that some pieces of this assemblage had reached the Avar Khaganate as gifts from the Byzantine administration.[217]

The majority of the truly fine and rare Byzantine objects were thus deposited within roughly half a century, when the intensity of the Byzantine-Avar diplomatic relations ebbed, at least compared to the previous period spanning some seventy years, from which there are far fewer objects (and lavish grave assemblages) that could even theoretically be plausibly regarded as having been diplomatic gifts received by the Avars. This picture is deceptive, to say the least, and this optical illusion can partly be traced to the changes in burial customs and the turns in the historical situation. The presence of the most valuable articles in the burials of the highest elite is in part logical because the identification of elite burials is to no small extent based on these relics. However, in the case of the Carpathian Basin during the Avar period, we find that the majority of these assemblages date not from the successful, dynamic period of the early Avar Khaganate, but from the decades after the cessation of the inflow of the extorted Byzantine gold.[218]

It is noteworthy that a part of the more closely datable Byzantine articles in these grave assemblages were deposited many decades after their manufacture. The Kunágota solidus and the control stamps on the Tépe plate date these pieces to Justinian I's reign. The Kunbábony amphora falls into the later sixth century or the early decades of the seventh century, while the assemblage's magnificent gold buckle was made sometime at the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries. The gold sheets stripped from a casket and the smoky opal pendant and gold cylinder, the latter two possibly once part of a Byzantine necklace, from Kunágota (*Fig. 80*) can be assigned to the sixth century in view of comparable finds. The pendants refashioned to suit local taste (irrespective of whether they came from earrings or a decorative collar) and the leaf-shaped pendant, likewise from a necklace, brought to light at Ozora have a similar date or are slightly later. The large polished garnets of the Kiskőrös collar were probably also taken from some other jewellery article and then reworked.[219] While the setting and the small conical pendants bespeak the hand of a local goldsmith, the date of the earlier original object from which the garnets were taken remains uncertain. Despite comparable finds from Italy and southern Germany, the gold strips once adorning some textile clothing found in the burial cannot be dated more closely within the sixth and seventh centuries, although the properties of textile as a raw material would suggest that it cannot have been very old at the time of its deposition, and the same holds true for the pair of earrings, whose counterparts can be found among the Byzantine articles arriving to the Carpathian Basin in the 650s–670s.[220] The golden belt sets from Kunágota and Ozora can in all likelihood be assigned to the latter chronological horizon, although the worn condition of the latter suggests that the belt had been in use for quite a long time.[221]

Each of the burials mentioned in the above represents an individual case and should therefore be interpreted on its own terms with a view to its distinctive traits, even more so because of the geographic and chronological differences between their groups and the diversity of the burial rites. Nevertheless, it would appear that the outstandingly rich male burials of the middle third of the seventh century (Kunbábony and perhaps Tépe [?] in

Fig. 80. 1. Byzantine necklace with gold cross, a chalcedony (?) pendant set in gold, a gold medallion and three small gold tubes from the Mersin Treasure, Mersin, Turkey, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. 2. Smoky opal pendant and small gold tube from the Kunágota burial, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

the "Danube-Tisza interfluve group", and Kunágota in the Tisza region, dating from the close of this period) contained several valuable Byzantine objects originating from the dynamic period of Avar-Byzantine relations that had probably been amassed and safeguarded in treasuries during the preceding decades.[222] Older Byzantine objects from the treasuries had also been deposited in the similarly lavishly outfitted male, female, and child burials of the century's final third uncovered at Ozora and Kiskőrös (although sometimes in a broken condition, occasionally repaired or reworked to suit local tastes). These were also accompanied by the articles reaching the Carpathian Basin at the time of the slightly more dynamic connections of the 650s–670s.

Several explanations have been proposed for why, with the exception of a few south-eastern Transdanubian female burials, the most lavishly furnished burials of the Avar Khaganate date not from the period of the greatest triumphs between 567 and 626, but from the subsequent decades. It has been suggested, for example, that the pre-626 burials of the khagan and his family as well as of his entourage should be sought south of the Carpathian Basin where they resided at the time of the campaigns against Byzantium. Others have argued that the burials of the Kunbábony-Kunágota-Ozora or the Ozora-Igar group represent the interments of a new immigrant population from the eastern steppe.[223] The written sources indeed record that various new groups continued to settle in the lands ruled by Avars after the 560s, too. According to Theophylact Symocatta, the Tarniach and the Kotzager, and perhaps the Zabender, all peoples fleeing the Türks, sought refuge among the Avars in the 580s. Although this is not mentioned in the relevant passage, it is generally assumed that these population groups had settled in the Carpathian Basin, though it is not entirely impossible that they had been allotted pastures in the westerly region of the southern Russian steppe under Avar overlordship.[224] Another immigrant population is known from the second half of the seventh century: the fourth son of Kuvrat, the ruler of Magna Bolgaria, and his army, who arrived to the Carpathian Basin from the Eastern Europe steppe, although a part of this population is known to have moved on shortly.[225] Similar population movements could well have occurred during the intermediate decades, too, and thus it would not come as a surprise if these had left an imprint in the archaeological record.[226] As "gatherers of peoples", the khagans were always in need of loyal weapon-bearing men who submitted to their rule, particularly in times of uncertainty such as the decades after the ebb of the Byzantine gold tribute. At the same time, the practice of attributing new elements in the archaeological record to the arrival of new population groups remains a matter of controversy, in part owing to its formerly often hasty, imprudent application and in part owing to the uncertainties in identifying ethnic differences in the archaeological record.[227] It is a fact that several new cemeteries were opened across the Carpathian Basing in the middle and final third of the seventh century and that there was a perceptible northward shift in the major hubs of the settlement network compared to the earlier decades (*Fig. 81*). This can in part be explained by the political changes within the khaganate and the internal relocations of its population: instead of looking southward for its source of wealth, Early Avar society was increasingly forced to rely on its own internal resources.[228] Alongside the sudden break in the flow of the gold tribute, the transformation of the social structure also became a source of conflict with long-term consequences.

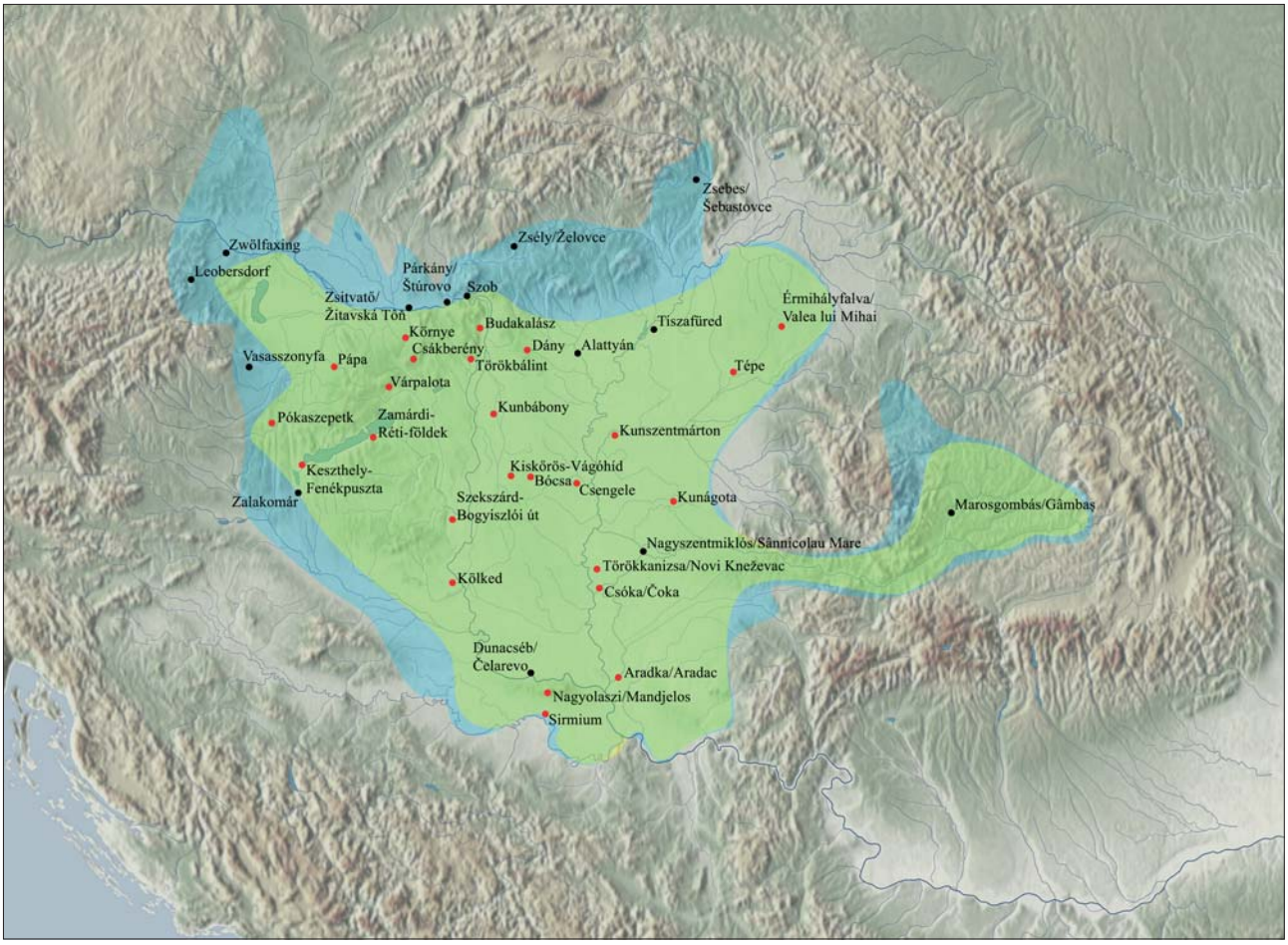

Fig. 81. Rough extent of the Early Avar-period settlement territory in the Carpathian Basin (green) and the newly-occupied territories from the later seventh century onward (blue). The northern half of the Tisza region and the central and northern areas of the Danube-Tisza interfluve became more densely settled by the Avar-period population from the last decades of the Early Avar period onward, after the 620s

The appearance of exceptionally lavish burials after 626 is in line with Georg Kossack's model of elite burials (his *Prunkgräber* model), according to which an imposing display of wealth and social status was less of a necessity when the elite's position was stable, while times of social transformations involving profound changes and upheavals called for the spectacular demonstration of the elite's might and power under the new circumstances in order to impress on their subjects that they were still quite capable of major achievements and still enjoyed the benevolence of the heavenly powers for performing glorious deeds.[229] In death, the funeral provided

an opportunity for ostentation for those, who had achieved less in life in terms of memorable deeds. The finely made, valuable symbols of rank signalled their position in the Avar Khaganate's social order. In the case of the noble interred at Kunbábony, these were the belts studded with gold belt ornaments, the sword with its golden fittings, the bow and quiver with its golden mounts and the gold drinking horns, as well as the crescentic pectoral ornament, the latter following an East-Central Asian tradition, in this particular instance probably made for the funeral and sewn onto the funerary garment or shroud (*Fig. 82*). The handful of Eastern Roman articles deposited in the Kunbábony burial and at Tépe (the latter possibly also part of the grave assemblage of an Avar dignitary) had probably been taken from their treasury and were intended to emphasise their foreign connections, their achievements in life, and one source of their wealth.[230] Perhaps a similar message can be ascribed to the Kunágota male burial despite its less ostentatious display of symbols of power, an interment in a region with different burial traditions and differing modes of social display. A few decades later, the burials of a wealthy man and two women found at Ozora, the latter with a lavish array of jewellery—with many Eastern Roman articles incorporated into the funerary costume in a mode differing from their original use—represent a different case. The two female burials also offer a rare, fascinating insight into how Byzantine fashion and Byzantine-style objects influenced the (funerary) costume worn by wealthy women who had access to original pieces, a phenomenon that can be but rarely observed through Avar elite burials. Irrespective of whether these articles originated from among the older pieces of the high-ranking family's treasury or whether they had been received through the connections resumed for a brief period after the 650s, the message conveyed by these pieces was that their owners were among the privileged few with access to rare foreign goods, who had partaken in the successful ventures necessary for their acquisition.

Fig. 82. 1. Gem-inlaid gilded torc, Jihe-Nur, Grave 3, late fifth to early sixth century, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China. 2. Crescentic funerary torc from Kunbábony, Grave 1, mid-seventh century, Katona József Museum, Kecskemét

To be sure, it would doubtless be an over-simplification to view this solely in the context of the events in the Carpathian Basin and of Avar-Byzantine relations.[231] A gold horizon of rich sacrificial assemblages and lavish

burials appears more or less simultaneously in the Eastern European region, which, despite heated debates over important details, is generally interpreted as the archaeological imprint of the short-lived Magna Bulgaria ruled by Kuvrat, who, buoyed by Byzantine gold, turned against the Avars,[232] and of the early Khazar rule, which Byzantium similarly cushioned with gold.[233] In other words, it is the legacy of some fifty or seventy years, an age of competing elites, when there was no lack of Eastern European elite groups vying with each other for power, or of dramatic changes, which would explain the "flourishing" of a find horizon abounding in Byzantine objects and articles modelled on Byzantine pieces.

These decades of the seventh century coincided with a crisis that in hindsight proved to be of immense significance,[234] leading to the collapse of the late antique world order and the radical transformation of the Iranian and Mediterranean realms. The mid- to later seventh century saw the fall of the Sasanian Empire, the weakening of the Byzantine state, and the rise and subsequent consolidation of Muslim power that wrested extensive territories from these two empires, which essentially determined the options of the Avar, Bulgar, and Khazar elites as well as the challenges they faced. The loss of Byzantium's Balkanic lands robbed the Avars of the very source of income, which in the early period had cemented their society, a patchwork of groups with diverse origins and ambitions. From this time, access to Byzantine gold and prestige items became more difficult and was not as self-evident during the "second flourishing" between 650 and 680 as in the decades before 626 (it no longer meant the price of peace and thus depended more on the intentions and the appraisal of the overall situation of the party providing the subsidy). Byzantium's losses in the Balkans simultaneously opened the way for Asparuch and his people, retreating westward from the Khazar grip, to settle in the north-eastern corner of the Balkans. Although this would have been feasible under Byzantine overlordship, too, it would likely have led to the rapid absorption of the arriving Bulgars by the local population (as in the case of several other groups before them). From the early eighth century, the Khazars, winners of the Eastern European struggle for power, clashed increasingly often with the Umayyad Caliphate, the new leading power of the Iranian and Mediterranean world. Following the emergence of the new balance of power by the close of the seventh century, the funerary and sacrificial assemblages abounding in Byzantine gold and silver largely disappeared from the archaeologically visible horizon on the northern fringes of the Mediterranean, an indication that the leaders of these societies had consolidated their position, conforming to the new world order.

Conclusion

Arriving from the grassland of Asia first to Eastern Europe and thence migrating to the Carpathian Basin in the mid-sixth century, the European history of the Avars was for seventy years bound to the Eastern Roman Empire, the neighbouring superpower, with a myriad strands. The newcomers' military success under their charismatic leader and their experience of empire-building brought from their former homeland led to the foundation of the khaganate in East-Central Europe. Yet, brute force alone would have been insufficient for the cohesion of an empire made up of peoples with different ancestries, traditions, and interests: an economy geared to integrating different ambitions and tapping into their subjects' willingness for maintaining Avar power was essential. From the very beginning, Avar economy principally thrived on Eastern Roman gold, and in order to acquire the necessary riches from Constantinople, the Avar khagans were able to unite the peoples on the Empire's northern frontier who had earlier often clashed with each other: the Gepids, the remnants of the Langobards, the western Old Turkic-speaking tribes of the Eastern European steppe, and the groups designated as Slavs in the sources.

Striving to ensure the defence of the Empire's frontiers largely by enlisting external forces, Justinian I's administration initially supported the consolidation of Avar power with gifts and subsidies, gambling on the belief that this would simultaneously neutralise the Empire's enemies and secure a useful ally in the long run. His successors only had to pay the price of peace using the same strategies. Although the overall goals changed with time, the Roman arsenal remained the same: a search for allies in the enemy's back, missionary activity to spread Christianity, the purchase of the enemy's "goodwill", the display of Roman power and wealth, and, as a last resort, the use of military power. The reluctance to wage war was not fuelled by cowardice or a dislike of violence: the combined strength of the peoples hostile to the Empire living along her extensive frontiers led the lords of Constantinople to stave off any dangers by means of an alliance system nurtured with gold.

Presented in the above through the case study of the Avars was how gifts, subsidies/tribute, and psychological pressure from the very moment that the envoys sent by the neighbouring peoples set foot on Roman soil served to maintain this system. The Avars' example also illustrates how the Empire, by parading its immense wealth, resources, and power, did not always achieve the desired effect. In lucky cases, this would make a neighbour scheming to launch an attack against imperial lands think twice, while in others it merely whetted appetites for a share of the Empire's wealth. As "gatherers of peoples", the charismatic khagans of the Avars, well versed in the art of empire-building, represented the latter: they interpreted Constantinople's message as an

invitation. Their dignity, their ambitions, their people's economy, and the maintenance of their empire's cohesion all pointed in this one direction.

By flaunting its power and wealth, Eastern Roman policy had another impact through the generous gifts presented for securing goodwill and cementing alliances. The wide array of objects received as gifts or as part of the subsidy/tribute, or simply purchased in marketplaces by the khagan's envoys and the khaganate's population who had been to Roman lands created a distinctive *fashion*. In the Carpathian Basin, this phenomenon can mainly be studied through the pieces inspired by their style that were often adjusted to the taste of the local population rather than through genuine Eastern Roman articles. That the genuine Eastern Roman products had been worn by the elite during the seventy-five years after the Avars' first appearance in Constantinople can, more often than not, be inferred from the *impact* they had on the costume of their subjects. Under the known historical circumstances, showing off their silks, their belts, and their jewellery probably meant more for the Avar dignitaries than merely declaring their privileged status. The display of commodities from distant lands acquired through foreign connections was typical of many early medieval elites, to which a further element was added in Early Avar-period society: the valuable goods from the Eastern Roman lands were *material emblems of success*. Wearing these articles signalled that a particular individual had partaken in the achievements of the khaganate led by a charismatic leader enjoying the grace of the Heavens and in the political ventures yielding immense riches.[235] Displays of riches of foreign origin conveyed the political power of its owner and his family, betokening his suitability to his current and future clients. Among socially less prominent folks, possessing an article of this type was a visual expression of a position near the khagan's orbit.

The use of similar visual cues can also be noted among the Türks. The statues of Bilge khagan and Kül tegin erected in the earlier eighth century are cases in point: the former wears a ceremonial belt in the Chinese style, the latter is portrayed with a headgear resembling the one worn by high-ranking Chinese military commanders. Knowing that unlike several earlier and later nomadic leaders, Bilge khagan consistently resisted all Chinese attempts to install him as an official, an act of symbolic submission, these costume elements and symbols of power in the Chinese style can hardly be seen as symbols of submission. On the contrary: they were a reference to the source of his wealth, to the "gold, silver and silk in abundance" received from the Chinese, that he had achieved through his military, diplomatic, and commercial successes.[236]

The Avar burials in the Carpathian Basin dating from the first decades also underscore the point that despite their rich symbolism, articles of foreign origin did not necessarily play a prominent role in constructed funerary identities. To be sure, the adoption of the insignia of a foreign power in an unchanged form did have its dangers. These goods, which occasionally underwent some alterations, were stored in treasuries and some were eventually deposited in the burials of family members as shown by the richly outfitted burials of the second and final third of the seventh century.

However, there was more than one potential avenue for the reception and appropriation of foreign cultural goods among the Avar-period communities of the Carpathian Basin and, given their diverse traditions and

disparate ancestries, the interpretations proposed for the distribution patterns of relics with Mediterranean affinities cannot be squeezed into a single model. Both the population groups with Roman roots and traditions in Transdanubia and the communities of Germanic ancestry of Transdanubia and the Tisza region, which had maintained ties with the Roman world since long, had a different attitude to products made in the Mediterranean style than the Avars, fresh arrivals from Asia. Depending on their wealth, their religious affiliations, and various other factors, the former regarded both the simpler and the finer, more elaborate pieces as customary elements of their costume and hence of their cultural identity. Although arriving with the Avars from the Eastern European steppe, the groups which had established some contact with the Eastern Roman world before the 560s again had a fairly different perception of these articles. The wide range of belt fittings made in the Byzantine style, which enjoyed general and widespread popularity, was the main link between these groups, even if there were minor differences between and even within smaller regions, not to speak of the entire khaganate. For example, while the belts studded with mounts in the Byzantine style were popular in the regions both east of the Tisza and in Transdanubia, simple cast copper-alloy buckles of the Mediterranean type were more widely used in the latter region. Genuine Eastern Roman jewellery items are scarcer east of the Danube than to its west in the first half of the Avar period,[237] a reflection of the choices made during the selection process in certain communities when appropriating foreign goods for their own use, eloquent examples of which can be found among the creative alteration of jewellery items. The same is suggested by the lack of certain artefact types and stylistic elements in the material record of the Carpathian Basin, despite their prominent role among the period's Eastern Roman artefacts. Suffice it here to cite a single example, namely the widespread use of precious stones in sixth- and seventh-century Byzantine jewellery style, which barely finds an echo among the period's relics from the Carpathian Basin.

These are not the sole indications that the diverse ancestries and traditions of the khagan's peoples influenced their cultural orientations to a large extent. The connections with the west maintained by the communities characterised by Germanic traditions of Transdanubia and the Tisza region were not disrupted even after their integration into the khaganate's political organisation. Western merchandise arriving to the Carpathian Basin and the local products inspired by them attest to the trade contacts, while the commodities given in exchange, a part of which perhaps originated from the valuables that reached the region as part of the wealth extortion, then made their way westward.[238] In addition to the traditional modes of exchange, the ties between the Langobards remaining in Pannonia under Avar rule and their peers who had moved to Italy could have also played a role. It would appear that even though the lords of the nomadic empires were keen to retain control over foreign policy for themselves,[239] the leaders of the communities who had submitted to Avar rule could to a certain extent maintain their own independent connections. Given the extensively plundered cemeteries, only a male burial uncovered at Keszthely[240] besides a handful of female interments attest to the prominent status of this population. The example provided by the Kölked communit(ies) is particularly illuminating. The first generation of the

Fig. 83. Niello-inlaid gold brooch and bracelet engraved with a monogram from Grave 119 of Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery B, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

community settling here at the onset of the Avar rule was interred with the artefact types and costume elements current in the Langobard period. The graves of the next generation include a most lavishly furnished and plundered burial of a woman, whose riches eclipse the wealth of the previous period and whose articles point towards the west, principally towards Italy (*Fig. 83*),[241] suggesting that while one source of the community's affluence was doubtless a share of the gold tribute received in the wake of the khaganate's successes against Byzantium,[242] the leaders of the Kölked community used their share somewhat differently than their Avar overlords owing to their different political and cultural orientation.

This cultural milieu had an impact on the new groups arriving from the east and settling in the proximity of the local Transdanubian communities, as exemplified by the Avars settling at Kölked at the time of the second generation. Every single element of the costume worn by the woman laid to rest in Grave 108 of the Kölked A cemetery conforms to the Central European traditions: the disc brooch fastening her cloak, the two stylus pins for securing her veil, the adornments of her leg-bindings, and the pair of golden crescentic earrings. The iron folding chair decorated with metal inlay can be ranked among the goods originating from Italy, whence the golden earrings had perhaps also been acquired (*Figs 84–85*). As it turned out, the woman was of Asian stock, and while she could hardly transform the overall physique with which she was born,[243] she could—and indeed did—reinvent herself by changing all other aspects of her appearance, first and foremost the costume she wore, her "social skin", to use Terence S. Turner's ingenious phrase.[244]

Fig. 84. Crescentic gold earring from Grave 108 of Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery A, Hungarian National Museum, Budapest

Fig. 85. Reconstruction of the costume and facial features of the woman interred in Grave 108 of Kölked-Feketekapu, Cemetery A. Concept: Tivadar Vida, drawing: Zoltán Boldog

Unlike the woman of Sayano-Mongolid stock buried at Kölked, the majority of the Avars subjugating the Carpathian Basin and its peoples in 567–568 apparently elected to change, or complement, no more than a select few elements of their "social skin" with articles in the Eastern Roman style. They did not become Romans in appearance—the Roman dress accessories merely added a few new details to their distinctive appearance, found to be most peculiar by other peoples, but did not fundamentally alter it.

The cessation of the flow of Byzantine gold led to a series of profound changes in the khaganate, whose discussion is beyond the scope of this book. While the connections between the peoples of Avaria and the Mediterranean population did not cease entirely, their main thrust and intensity changed considerably. The dynamic contacts maintained with the powers of Italy remained fairly strong and assumed a new importance. Constantinople receded into the distance, even if a brief alliance was again forged with the Avar lords in the third quarter of the seventh century, in the wake of which subsidies were again sent regularly to Avaria.[245] However, the gradual uniformisation of the find material of the Carpathian Basin from the later seventh century onward indicates that the peoples gathered by the khagan, who were for many decades pressed into serving the maintenance of the wealth extortion, had gradually turned into the agrarian population of an early medieval Central European polity.[246]

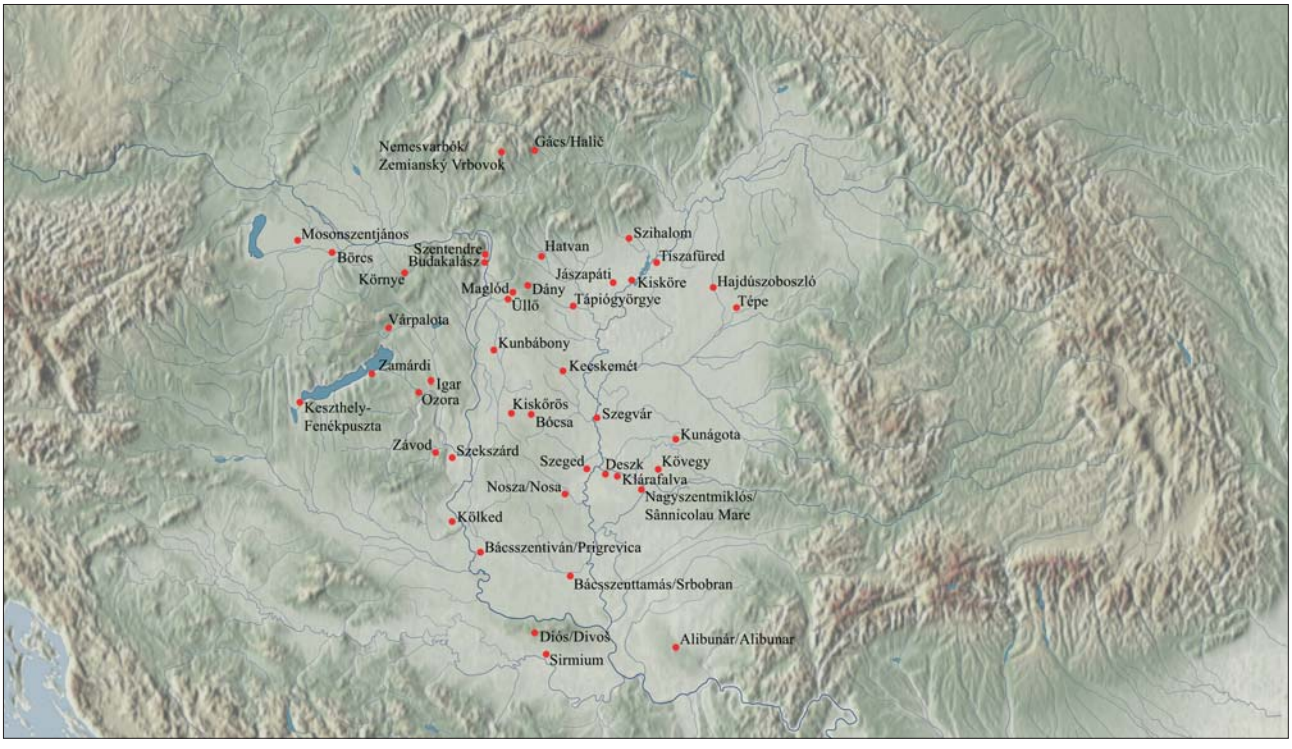

Fig. 86. The sites in the Carpathian Basin mentioned in the text

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Notes

1 For a detailed coverage of Avar history in English, see Walter Pohl's recently published book (Pohl 2018), which offers an exhaustive discussion of most of the themes addressed here, although occasionally from a different perspective. For the transition between the first and second half of the Avar period and the problems of periodisation, see Szenthe 2014, 99–100.

2 Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* VII.8.2, transl. Dobrovits 2006, 178, cf. Dobrovits 2001, 99; for a slightly different translation, see Whitby-Whitby 1986, 189 (English); Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 15; Olajos 2012b, 246 (Hungarian).

3 Iohannes Malalas, *Chronographia* XVIII.125, transl. Jeffreys–Jeffreys–Scott 1986, 296 (English). For the Avars' first appearance in an Eastern Roman account describing the events of the earlier 460s, see Priscus Panaita, *Historiae* Frg. 40.1: Blockley 1981, 344–345 (Greek/English)

4 Iohannes Ephesinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI.24, transl. Smith 1860, 428 (English).

5 Theophanes, *Chronographia* s.a. A.M. 6050 = 557/558 AD, transl. Mango–Scott 1997, 339–340 (English).

6 Agathias Scholasticus, *Historiae* I.3.4, transl. Frendo 1975, 11 (English).

7 For the Avar settlement territory as indicated by the written sources, see Dobrovits 2001, 98; for the archaeological, physical anthropological, and genetic evidence pointing farther to the east, see Csáky *et al.* 2019. For a case against a direct Rouran and Hephthalite descent as argued in previous studies, see Vásáry 2003, 72–73.

8 For a comprehensive discussion of this hairstyle, see Bálint 2006, 330–334; for the hairstyle of the funerary statues, see Stark 2008, 130. For a discussion of the Türks as depicted on the Afrasiab frescoes, see Compareti 2016, 92–100 (with the earlier literature).

9 Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* XXXI.2: Rolfe 1939, 380–381 (Latin/English).

10 Pulszky 1874.

11 László 1935; László 1938.

12 The pioneering work was undertaken by Csanád Bálint and Éva Garam: Bálint 1992; Bálint 1993; Bálint 1995; the first comprehensive study was published by the latter: Garam 2001. For subsequent major studies, see Vida 2009; Daim 2010; Daim 2011; Vida 2016a; Vida 2018a; Bálint 2019; Blay 2020; Samu 2020.

13 For the population groups with Roman traditions, see Vida 2009; Müller 2019; for the Transdanubian groups characterised by Germanic cultural traditions, see Vida 2018a; for the communities with Gepidic roots in the Tisza region, see Vida 2019; Garam 2018, 358–368 (with a look also at the final third of the seventh century); for the Langobards remaining in Transdanubia after 568, see Koncz 2015; Vida 2018a.

14 For good overviews with a detailed discussion of the archaeological evidence and the earlier literature, see Lőrinczy 1998; Lőrinczy 2016, 162–166. For their potential earlier Eastern European settlement territories, see Gulyás 2016. For a brief overview of previous research and a more sceptical take on issues of origins, see Gáll–Mărginean 2020, 397–403. For a recent review of the Transdanubian groups, see Gulyás in press.

15 Szőke 1992. For a discussion of the groups designated as Slavs in the sixth- and seventh-century sources, see Curta 2001.

16 Tomka 2005; Tomka 2008; Balogh 2016; Szenthe 2015; Vida 2018a.

17 István Vásáry (1983, 200) proposed that the name El-terish in the Kül Tegin Inscription (East 11, cf. Tekin 1968, 233, 265, transliterated as "il-teris" [Old Turkic/English]) be translated as "Power-Gathering khagan", a more accurate rendering of the name's meaning, although he also used the traditional translation of "People-Gathering khagan" (Vásáry 2003, 78).

18 For a detailed analysis of the texts, see Vásáry 1983, esp. 197–202; for the ideological filter of the inscriptions, see Dobrovits 2001, 87–89; Dobrovits 2012. Cf. also Zimonyi 2003.

19 For the publication of the gaming pieces and their possible Germanic cultural context, see Koncz–Tóth 2016. For the elephant ivory finds from the Carpathian Basin, see Koncz–Bollók 2021.

20 For a recent discussion of how to distinguish the products of these two regions and the accentuation of the role of Italy, see Bálint 2019.

21 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 5.1: Blockley 1985, 48–49 (Greek/English). For the life of Menander and his sources, see Baldwin 1978; Blockley 1985, 1–2, 19–20.

22 As has been duly emphasised by Blockley 1985, 10–12, and Whittow 2018, 282–283. For the rhetorical devices of unfurling (reworking) a literary image from the available information, see Roberts 1989, esp. 38–65.

23 Nechaeva 2014, 163–205, 243–253.

24 Iohannes Ephesinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI.24: Smith 1860, 428 (English). An interpretation of the term used by John as "saddle-cloths" was raised in the Hungarian translation of the passage by Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 30.

25 Somogyi 2014, 115; Lőrinczy 2019, 184. Although this coin most likely reached the Carpathian Basin at the close of the Gepidic period, another of the emperor's solidi found in a burial uncovered at Gyula, Nagy-Szőlő III was in all likelihood deposited during the Early Avar period: Bencsik-Vári–Liska 2019; Somogyi 2019, 617–619.

26 Bollók 2019, 233–234. The piece shown in the photo was published by Dannheimer 2000.

27 For the two-part gold belt of the *magister militum*, see Iohannes Lidus, *De magistratibus* II.13: Carney 1965, 46–47 (English). For the belts with multiple straps worn in the army, see Eger 2016.

28 Németh 2018.

29 Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 19, dates the journey of Valentinus and his companions between 558 and 560. For the practice of block diplomacy, see Nechaeva 2014, 80–86, cf. also Bollók 2019, 213, note 11.

30 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 5.2: Blockley 1985, 48–51 (Greek/English). For the political background of Justinian's move, see Pohl 2018, 25, 47–49.

31 Agathias, *Historiae* V.25.4–5: Frendo 1975, 161–162 (English).

32 For the population of the Tisza region and the Eastern European affinities of their archaeological material (which should not be taken to imply that this group was exclusively made up of the communities that were part of the tribal alliance known as the Kutrigurs), see the studies cited in note 14. For the brief duration of the period during which the Kutrigur and Utigur ethnonyms appear in the sources and the historical conclusions drawn thereof, see Sarantis 2016, 290–292.

33 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 12.5: Blockley 1985, 136–137 (Greek/English).

34 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 10.4, 19.1: Blockley 1985, 124–125, 172–173 (Greek/English). For the western Old Turkic languages, see Róna-Tas–Berta 2011.

35 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 19.1, 25.2: Blockley 1985, 222–225 (Greek/English).

36 In 579: Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 25.2: Blockley 1985, 222–225 (Greek/English); in 583: Iohannes Ephesinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* VI.45–49 = Michael Syrus, *Historia ecclesiastica* X.21: Chabot 1901, 363 (French).

37 Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* VII.8.8–10: Whitby–Whitby 1986, 190 (English); for the interpretation of the passage, see De La Vaissière 2010.

38 As suggested by the Bulgar troops operating in the Avar khagan's name north of the Lower Danube in 594: Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* VII.4.1–7: Whitby–Whitby 1986, 183–184 (English); Pohl 2018, 178.

39 Farkas 2001.

40 Nicephorus Constantinopolitanus, *Breviarium* 22: Mango 1980, 70–71 (Greek/English). For the location and extent of Kuvrat's Magna Bulgaria, see Róna-Tas 2000.

41 For the concept of outer clients and the salient traits of this system, see Skaff 2012.

42 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 5.4: Blockley 1985, 50–53 (Greek/English). It has been suggested that Justin was perhaps identical with the commander of the Caucasian region: Blockley 1985, 253, note 27; Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 22.

43 Nechaeva 2014, 133–135.

44 Dobrovits 2009, 79.

45 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 5.4: Blockley 1985, 52–53 (Greek/English).

46 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 5.2: Blockley 1985, 48–51 (Greek/English).

47 For a detailed coverage of Justinian's Balkanic policy and compelling arguments that, in contrast to earlier contentions, the Balkanic situation was among the emperor's main concerns, see Sarantis 2016. For the last Kutrigur attack, see Pohl 2018, 25.

48 For the reorganisation and partial abandonment of the *limes Arabicus* during Justinian's reign and the new alliance system, see Parker 2006, 562–569. The spread of Christianity among the tribes also contributed to cementing the alliance system: Schönléber 2013.

49 Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 26, §8 (the references to the embassy sent in 563); Cameron 1976, 2 (the dating of Corippus's Book III); Harmatta 1962, 134–146; Dobrovits 2009, 70–72; Dobrovits 2011, 380–382 (an overview of the first encounters between the Türks and Byzantium). For the Rouran khagan pursuing his "runaway" subjects, see Csongor 1993, 31 (Hungarian); for the demands of Batu khan that the Hungarian sovereign break the alliance with his fugitive "Cumanian slaves", see Julianus Hungarus, *Epistola de vita Tartarorum*: Bendefy 2018, 89, 94 (Latin/Hungarian); Györffy 1986, 80 (Hungarian).

50 Nechaeva 2014, 92, 103–104.

51 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 9.1: Blockley 1985, 100–101 (Greek/English).

52 As argued by Nechaeva 2014, 104. For the change in the policy towards the Avars under Justin II, see Olajos 2012a, 117.

53 Corippus, *In laudem Iustini* $III_{270-274,\ 277-278,\ 281-282,\ 298-307}$: Cameron 1976, 68–71, 107–108 (Latin/English). For Corippus's life, see Cameron 1976, 1–2; for the literary *topoi* he employed here, see Cameron 1976, 192. Cf. also Szikora 2014.

54 For the passages cited here, see Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 8: Blockley 1985, 92–95 (Greek/English).

55 Corippus, *In laudem Iustini* $III_{308-316,\ 319-322,\ 345-347,\ 392}$: Cameron 1976, 70–72, 108–110 (Latin/English). Menander offers an essentially similar account of what had transpired: Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 8: Blockley 1985, 94–97 (Greek/English).

56 Nechaeva 2014, 62–65.

57 For Transdanubia, see Vida 2018a. For eastern parallels to this practice, see Klyashtornyi 2004, 38; Skaff 2012, 172. For the role of nomadic rulers in the distribution of pastureland among their subjects, see Skaff 2012, 200, 244, 253.

58 Skaff 2012, 77. For a discussion of the techniques whereby political power and control were exercised and maintained through the investiture of the old elite by their new masters and the appointment of new leaders, see Drompp 2015, 438.

59 For the rhetoric skills of envoys, see Nechaeva 2014, 46–47.

60 For Peter the Patrician and his activity, see Treadgold 2010, 264–269. For the role of the *magister officiorum* and his office in these matters, see Nechaeva 2014, 26–29.

61 Text: Moffatt-Tall 2012, 398–410 (Greek/English). Quite understandably, several scholars have set themselves the task of analysing this unique text, e.g. Tinnefeld 1993; Dimitroukas 2008; Nechaeva 2014, 35–41.

62 *De ceremoniis* I.89: Moffatt-Tall 2012, 398–400 (Greek/English).

63 *De ceremoniis* I.89: Moffatt-Tall 2012, 400–401 (Greek/English).

64 The cityscape of Constantinople and the one-time appearance of her buildings can best be visualised through the conjectural reconstructions of Kostenec-Öner 2008.

65 *De ceremoniis* I.89: Moffatt-Tall 2012, 401–404 (Greek/English).

66 Lee-Shepard 1991, 32–34.

67 For the main public spaces of the late antique city, the splendid buildings gracing these spaces, and the ceremonial use of these spaces, see Bauer 1996.

68 For an overview of the Great Palace, see Bardill 2006.

69 Cf. Bauer 2006, 162–163.

70 The above description is based on the account of the reception of the Persian embassy to Constantinople in 551: *De ceremoniis* I.89–90: Moffatt–Tall 2012, 404–409.

71 Cf. Nechaeva 2014, 34–35, 88–93.

72 Corippus, *In laudem Iustini* $III_{231-245, 254-267}$: Cameron 1976, 67–68, 106–107 (Latin/English).

73 Brown 2018, 102.

74 *Povest' vremennyh let* s.a. AM 6495 (AD 987): Cross–Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953, 111 (English).

75 *Povest' vremennyh let* s.a. AM 6494–6495 (AD 986–987): Cross–Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953, 96–111 (English).

76 For the English translation of Procopius and Paul the Silentiary's sixth-century descriptions of the Hagia Sophia, both written in the finest literary style, see Mango 2006, 72–78, 80–96. For the church as an image of the cosmos, see McVey 1983; Mathews 1988; McVey 1993; Ćurčić 2010; McVey 2010.

77 The church was open to non-Chalcedonian Christians and non-Christian visitors alike: Papaconstantinou 2020, 181–183.

78 Stichel 2008; Stichel 2010.

79 *De ceremoniis* II.15: Moffatt–Tall 2012, 588–590 (Greek/English).

80 Cf. Lee–Shepard 1991, 35.

81 Paulus Silentarius, *Descriptione Sanctae Sophiae* $11_{987-990}$: Bell 2009, 210 (English). For the difficulties in the historical interpretation of the references hidden in the poetic image, see Bell 2009, 210–211, note 95; Lee–Shepard 1991, 35, note 110.

82 For the Sasanian envoys travelling to the Türk Khanagate incorporating the one-time lands of the Avars in the later sixth century, see Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 10.3: Blockley 1985, 120–123 (Greek/English). For the portrayal of the Türks and the region's different envoys on the mid-seventh-century Afrasiab frescoes, see Compareti 2016 (with the earlier literature).

83 For a comprehensive discussion of the diplomatic relations between early medieval China and the nomads as well as of diplomatic missions, see Skaff 2012, 135–141, 148–158. For Hunnic-Eastern Roman diplomatic relations, see Nechaeva 2018. For the rivalry between the Eastern Romans and the Sasanians, and particularly its ritual and visual dimensions, see Canepa 2010.

84 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 10.3: Blockley 1985, 118–119 (Greek/English). For a masterly analysis of the insights that can be drawn from the account of the embassy, see Dobrovits 2011.

85 Skaff 2012, 152, made the same point in relation to nomadic courts in general.

86 Tinnefeld 1993, 201–207.

87 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 10.3: Blockley 1985, 118–121 (Greek/English).

88 Cf. Dobrovits 2011, 389; Skaff 2012, 150.

89 Blockley 1985, 264, note 131; Dobrovits 2011, 389. For the Chinese and Persian silks received by the Türks, see Stark 2015, 470.

90 Dobrovits 2011, 389–390; for the Iranian and Sogdian origin of some statues and for the couches, see Stark 2015, 465, 485.

91 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 27.2: Blockley 1985, 238–239 (Greek/English).

92 For the Türks' wealth and the Persian booty, see Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* III.6.11, 14: Whitby–Whitby 1986, 81 (English); for the Hephthalite court, see Beal 1884, xci (English).

93 For the English translation of the Chinese text, see Beal 1911, 42–44; for its interpretation, see Skaff 2012, 150–152; Stark 2015, 470.

94 Skaff 2012, 152.

95 Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae* XVI.10: Rolfe 1935, 248–253, with 252–253 for the quotation (Latin/English).

96 Skaff 2012, 150–151 (the size of the tents and their symbolic meaning), 152 (the smaller scale of nomadic courts), 166 (the significance of the built environment in the case of the Chinese court).

97 Skaff 2012, 13, 139.

98 *De ceremoniis* I.89: Moffatt–Tall 2012, 405 (Greek/English).

99 Priscus Panaita, *Historiae* Frg. 14: Blockley 1981, 292–293 (Greek/English).

100 Priscus Panaita, *Historiae* Frg. 15.4: Blockley 1981, 298–299 (Greek/English), cf. Nechaeva 2014, 198, 249.

101 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* IV.7.2: Cameron–Hall 2010, 156 (English). For the probable origin of the horses, see Nechaeva 2014, 203.

102 Mayo 2002, esp. 60–66.

103 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* IV.7.2: Cameron–Hall 2010, 156 (English).

104 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 10.1: Blockley 1985, 114–115 (Greek/English).

105 For the gifts given by the Türks, see Stark 2015, 470; for the slave girl gifted to Zemarchus, see Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 10.3: Blockley 1985, 120–121 (Greek/English).

106 Liudprand Cremonensis, *Antapodosis* VI.6: Squatriti 2007, 199 (English).

107 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 8; Blockley 1985, 94–95 (Greek/English).

108 Ecsedy 1979, 98. The English version of Ecsedy's Hungarian paper, on which the above translation is based, essentially offers the same conclusions, cf. Ecsedy 1968, 141.

109 Ecsedy 1968, 147–148; Ecsedy 1979, 109–110. For the typical products offered by the stockbreeding pastoralist peoples, see Skaff 2012, 69; Di Cosmo 2015, 60.

110 Analysed in detail regarding Türk-Chinese and Chinese-Uyghur relations, see Skaff 2012, 241–271. For the efficacy of this strategy in Chinese-Hsiungnu and Chinese-Uyghur relations, see Di Cosmo 2002, 191–133; Skaff 2012, 268–271. For a detailed discussion with further examples, see Sinor 1972, 174–176.

111 As shown by the example of the Türks, see Stark 2015, 475–477.

112 Although often contested, a convincing case has been made for this claim by Di Cosmo 1994; Di Cosmo 2015, 58; Skaff 2012, 242; cf. also Sinor 1972, 174.

113 The extent to which natural catastrophes affected pastoral communities is discussed by Sinor 1972, 174, note 20; Kradin 2015, 15–16; Györffy-Zólyomi 1994, 25–27.

114 The most comprehensive modern study in English on nomadic economies and social systems as well as their corollary effects was written by Khazanov 1994. For other useful studies, relevant data, and discussions of various aspects, see Ecsedy 1976; Hoffmann 1996, 100–106; Vásáry 2003, 17–24; Skaff 2012, 33–35; Di Cosmo 2002, 13–43; Di Cosmo 2015; Kradin 2015.

115 Di Cosmo 2015.

116 For a description of steppean societies as an intricate web of patron-client relationships, see Skaff 2012. For the gift economies maintained by nomadic rulers, see Kradin 2015, 26–29; Skaff 2012, 77.

117 Nomadic political tradition regarded the desertion of an ill-fated leader and the shifting of allegiances to new patrons as a legitimate move, cf. Standen 2018.

118 Sinor 1972, 181–182; Lindner 1981, 14–16.

119 While the written evidence for trade in the sixth and seventh centuries is not particularly abundant, it was conducted on a truly grand scale from the ninth century onward, cf. Polgár 2019.

120 Priscus Panaita, *Historiae* Frg. 2, 11.1: Blockley 1981, 226–227, 242–243 (Greek/English).

121 For a discussion of the similar relation between the Türks and China, see Skaff 2012, 39–51, 241–271.

122 Nechaeva 2014, 52–53, with the earlier literature.

123 For an account of these events, see Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 12.5: Blockley 1985, 132–137 (Greek/English); for the practice of installing puppet rulers from the ranks of the enemy, see Skaff 2012, 176, 179–181; Drompp 2015, 439. The chapter's title is taken from the Kül Tegin Inscription (East 3): Tekin 1968, 232, 264 (Old Turkic/English).

124 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 10, 13.5: Blockley 1985, 110–117, 146–147 (Greek/English). For the Türk-Byzantine alliance and its political and commercial background, see Howard-Johnston 2010a, 46–51.

125 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 12.6–7 (Bayan's demands), 21, 25.1 (the peace and its price), 13.5 (the Persian war and the Türk alliance): Blockley 1985, 138–143, 146–147, 192–193, 216–217 (Greek/English). For a brief discussion of the wars conducted by Justin II and his successors, see Howard-Johnston 2010a, 51–59.

126 The events of the 570s are recounted in detail together with an overview of the relevant sources by Pohl 2018, 69–89. The sources are also collected in Hungarian translation with extensive commentaries by Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 37–54.

127 For the prominent role of charisma and how it was acquired by nomadic rulers, see Skaff 2012, 77, 79, 102, 114, 126, 206; Di Cosmo 2015, 65–67; Kradin 2015, 15, 25, 30, 35. For the other strategies, among them the accentuation of the benevolence of supernatural powers, employed by the leaders of nomadic polities for strengthening the cohesion of their empire made up of peoples with different ancestries, see Drompp 2015; Drompp 2018.

128 Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* VIII.6.1: Whitby-Whitby 1986, 217 (English).

129 For a detailed account of the events of the years between 580 and the 600s as well as the relevant sources, see Pohl 2018, 163–197. The sources are also gathered in Hungarian translation, alongside extensive commentaries by Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 58–140. For the strategies employed by nomadic empires for destabilising the frontier region of their neighbours, see Drompp 2015, 439.

130 The events are covered in detail by Howard-Johnston 2010b, 436–487. The date of the fall of Damascus and the Battle of Yarmuk is uncertain; both can be tentatively put between 634 and 638 on the testimony of the sources: Woods 2007.

131 For the Near Eastern provinces, see Mundell Mango 2006; for the Balkans, see Popović 1979; Milinković 2007.

132 Fodor 2019, 16–18.

133 If nothing else, the Avar incursion into Thrace after Maurice's death served as a warning: Theophanes, *Chronographia* s.a. 6094 AM = AD 601/602: Mango–Scott 1997, 414 (English).

134 Theophanes, *Chronographia* s.a. 6096 AM = 603/604 AD: Mango–Scott 1997, 420 (English).

135 For the sources, gathered in Hungarian, see Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 156–162.

136 Somogyi 2008, 357, 376.

137 Theophanes, *Chronographia* s.a. AM 6111 = 618/619 AD: Mango–Scott 1997, 434 (English); cf. also Bollók 2019, 228–229, notes 99–100.

138 Theophanes, *Chronographia* s.a. AM 6113 = 620/621 AD: Mango–Scott 1997, 435 (English).

139 For the sources, gathered in Hungarian translation, see Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 164–169.

140 Nicephorus Constantinopolitanus, *Breviarium* 13: Mango 1980, 58–59 (English/Greek); for the insights offered by the numismatic record, see Somogyi 2008, 356–357, Abb. 1.

141 *Chronicon Paschale* s.a. 626: Whitby-Whitby 1989, 172 (English).

142 Standen 2005; cf. also Drompp 2015, 439.

143 Somogyi 2008, 364. For the archaeological record, see Curta 2013, Bugarski–Radišić 2016.

144 Somogyi 2008, 356 Abb. 1, 357–358, 373, 384–385; Somogyi 2014, 87, 66–67, Abb. 1–4.

145 Several terms have been proposed for designating this salient feature of Eurasian nomadic states, see Kradin 2005; Kradin 2015; Di Cosmo 2015.

146 According to Kinga K. Éry, one of the foremost Hungarian specialists of physical anthropology, cited by Bálint 2010, 212–216.

147 Csáky *et al.* 2019.

148 Szalontai-Benedek-Károly 2014, 163–164, 167–169, 173–174.

149 Vida 2018a, 286.

150 Kül Tegin East 28–29 and Bilge Khagan North 10–12: Tekin 1968, 235, 247, 268, 280–281 (Old Turkic/English).

151 For the other techniques used by nomadic rulers to legitimise and exercise their power, see Drompp 2015; Drompp 2018.

152 Vásáry 2003, 65–66; Drompp 2005, 103.

153 Csongor 1993, 31 (Hungarian).

154 Fredegar, *Historia Francorum* IV.48: Wallace-Hadrill 1960, 39–40 (Latin/English). For the dating of the events, see Pohl 2018, 306. Fredegar also wrote about the attempts to extend the Frankish sphere of influence and to lure the Slavic tribes living in the frontier region between the two empires towards the Frank alliance elsewhere in his chronicle (*Historia Francorum* IV.58): Wallace-Hadrill 1960, 49 (Latin/English).

155 Nicephorus Constantinopolitanus, *Breviarium 22*: Mango 1980, 70–71 (Greek/English).

156 For the oblique reference with its many potential interpretations, see Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 211 (Hungarian).

157 Fredegar, *Historia Francorum* IV.72: Wallace-Hadrill 1960, 60–61 (Latin/English).

158 Pallas-Brown 2000; Vida 2016b, 254–255.

159 For the pivotal role played by the disbursements from the royal treasury in the cohesion of barbarian empires, see Hardt 2004, esp. 236–248.

160 Kunbábony, Grave 1: H. Tóth–Horváth 1992, 25–28, Abb. 1.

161 Nechaeva 2014, 243–453, esp. 244, List 1.2.

162 For the interpretation of this expression, see Nechaeva 2011.

163 Iohannes Ephesinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* VI.31: Smith 1860, 443 (English).

164 For calculations of the actual sums paid to the barbarians and their transportation, see Nechaeva 2014, 52.

165 Priscus Panaita, *Historiae* Frg. 13.1: Blockley 1981, 284–285 (Greek/English).

166 Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* I.3.8–12: Whitby–Whitby 1986, 24 (English).

167 For this level of negotiations, see Nechaeva 2014, 97–102.

168 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 12.5: Blockley 1985, 134–137 (Greek/English).

169 Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* VI.4.3: Whitby–Whitby 1986, 163 (English).

170 Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* VII.13.6: Whitby–Whitby 1986, 197 (English).

171 For the Byzantine practice, see *De ceremoniis* I.89: Moffatt–Tall 2012, 404–408 (Greek/English); for the Chinese one, see Skaff 2012, 139.

172 *De ceremoniies* I.89: Moffatt–Tall 2012, 400 (Greek/English); Nechaeva 2014, 66.

173 For example, the Emperor Maurice sent a golden couch to the Persian ruler who had been deposed and sought refuge in Byzantium: Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* V.3.7: Whitby–Whitby 1986, 135 (English).

174 Nachaeva 2018, esp. 366–367 (for the couches). For the golden couches of the imperial palace, see Corippus, *In laudem Iustiniani* III_{216}: Cameron 1976, 67, 106 (Latin/English).

175 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 5.4: Blockley 1985, 52–53 (Greek/English).

176 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 15.6: Blockley 1985, 150–151 (Greek/English), cf. also Bollók 2019, 231, note 125.

177 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 25.1: Blockley 1985, 216–217 (Greek/English).

178 Menandros, *Historiae* Frg. 25.2: Blockley 1985, 226–227 (Greek/English).

179 Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* I.3.7: Whitby–Whitby 1986, 24 (English).

180 Iohannes Ephesinus, *Vitae beatorum orientalium* 55: Brooks 1925, 192–193 (Syriac/English); Leontius Neapolitanus, *Vita Sancti Joannis Eleemosynarii* 21: Dawes-Baynes 1996, 229–230 (English).

181 Ivanics 1999.

182 For the Byzantine silks woven with gold sent to the Kutrigurs, see Procopius, *De bello gothico* IV.19.17: Dewing 1928, 250–251 (Greek/English). I am grateful to Oleksij V. Komar (Kiev) for confirming the lack of silk in the sixth-century burials of the Eastern European steppe. It has been suggested that some of the textile imprints surviving on the reverse of the Kunbábony gold sheets perhaps represent silk: Balogh 2019a. For an overview of the silk finds from the Hungarian Conquest period, see Bollók *et al.* 2009.

183 Curta 2016, 308, 320.

184 For the amphora finds, see Csiky–Magyar-Hárshegyi 2015; for the glass vessels, see Garam 2001, 172–173, 379 Taf. 128; Bollók 2019, 234.

185 Hajnal 2005. For arguments in favour of the western Balkanic or Italian origin of some amphorae, see Gandila 2018, 48; in contrast, a more convincing case is made for their import from the Lower Danube region by Csiky–Magyar-Hárshegyi 2015. The prominence of the Early Avar-period population of Kölked is amply reflected by the settlement's houses (Hajnal 2009) and the grave inventories of the cemetery (Garam 2018, 371).

186 Somogyi 1997; Somogyi 2007–2008; Somogyi 2014, 237–241, Tab. 1, 248–249, Karte 1; Somogyi 2016, 146; Bollók 2019, 233.

187 Samu 2020, 22.

188 Garam 2001, 388–390, Taf. 137–139; Rácz 2014.

189 For a comprehensive discussion of the development of pseudo-buckles, see Gavrituhin 2001; Samu–Daim 2017–2018. For the Sasanian buckles of the fifth and sixth centuries appearing in the territories under Western Türk rule from the later sixth century onward, see Kazanskij 2002.

190 Balogh 2019b, 117.

191 For the role of belts in investiture ceremonies in the period's steppean societies, see Skaff 2012, 160–166, 288–289.

192 For a detailed discussion with the earlier literature, see Garam 2001; Vida 2018a; Blay 2020.

193 For a recent detailed assessment, see Balogh 2014.

194 For bird pendants, see Garam 1990. For recent studies on necklaces with medallions, see Lőrinczy 1992, 170–180; Garam 2001, 39–40, Taf. 16–17; Balogh 2018; Bálint 2019, 119.

195 Similar pieces can easily be found by leafing through thematic catalogues, e.g. Spier 2010, 198–253.

196 For the classification of the finds, see Samu–Daim 2017–2018; for an overview of the complex manufacturing technique of the high-quality gold pseudo-buckles, see Heinrich-Tamáska-Voss *et al.* 2018.

197 For Sogdian craftsmen working among the Türks, see Stark 2015, 465–468. For the sculptors and painters requested by the Türk khagan, see the inscriptions of Kül tegin (South 11) and Bilge khagan (North 14): Tekin 1968, 232, 247, 263, 281 (Old Turkic/English); for their traces in the archaeological record, see Stark 2015, 488–489. For the request of the Rouran khagan, see Csongor 1993, 51–52 (Hungarian). For Bayan's request, see Iohannes Ephesinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* VI.24: Smith 1860, 430 (English). For the Mongols' policy, see, e.g., Allsen 1997, 30–45.

198 The belt set was first published by Popović 1997; for the technical analysis of the belt set, see Heinrich-Tamáska–Voss *et al.* 2018.

199 The currently known finds have been reviewed by Vida 2016a, 73–88.

200 Garam 2001, 175–176, 384 Taf. 13, 432 Taf. XL.4.

201 Garam 2001, Taf. 128.1; Garam–Bárdos 2009, 267 Taf. 66.13.

202 Garam 2001, Taf. 126–128; Kiss 2001, II.54 Taf. 40.20; Garam–Bárdos 2009, 267 Taf. 66.13; Balogh 2016, 74, 134–136, 467, Table 18; Scharrer-Liška–Greiff 2018.

203 A point also made by Vida 2018a, 182–183.

204 Garam 1973; Garam 2001, 169–171. For yet another goblet, presumably from Italy, see Scharrer-Liška–Greiff 2018.

205 For assemblages made up of a goblet and a drinking horn, see Garam 2002, 96–99.

206 Garam 1973; Garam 2001, 169–172; Garam 2002, 96–99.

207 For the glass goblet from Zamárdi, see Garam–Bárdos 2009, 267 Taf. 66.13; for the glass drinking horn from Srbobran (Hung. Bácsszenttamás, Serbia), see Garam 2002, 99; Wicker 2015; Balogh 2016, 74–75, Fig. 19; for metal drinking horns, see Garam 2002, 98–9, Fig. 24; Bálint 2010, 504–511.

208 Given that formal models of widely differing craftsmanship to the wide-bellied, wide-mouthed goblets from Bócsa, Tépe, Kunágota, and other sites are known from the Roman period onward, some scholars believe that the Early Avar-period pieces and their counterparts from Eastern Europe were modelled on late antique Mediterranean pieces: Elbern 2003; Bálint 2010, 227–232, Fig. 83. In addition to the Byzantine tradition, these goblets also share similar traits with Tang-period Chinese vessels, as pointed out by Marschak 1986, 326, and Komar 2006, 62–63, 109 Ris. 25. For the possible connections between the metal vessels, including goblets, of these two geographically distant empires, see Mundell Mango 2000.

209 Garam 2001 *passim*; Somogyi 1997, 59–60, Cat. no. 44.

210 Garam 2001 *passim*; Somogyi 1997, 71–72, Cat. no. 56; Prohászka 2010.

211 *Vita Theodori Syceotae* 5: Dawes–Baynes 1996, 89 (English). Sykeon lay north-west of modern Ankara.

212 Prohászka 2010, 238.

213 Garam 2001, 44, made a case for earrings. However, since with the exception of a single exemplar (the famous Assiut pectoral), jewelled collars are solely known from the period's depictions, it is equally feasible that the amethyst pendants from Ozora had been removed from a collar of this type, given that their gem-set pendants are highly similar in type and appearance.

214 Garam 2001 *passim*.

215 For the embassy of 678, see Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 6169 = 676/677 AD: Mango–Scott 1997, 496 (English); Bálint 2010, 620–622; Somogyi 2008, 373; Pohl 2018, 329.

216 Somogyi 2008.

217 For the assemblage, see Vida 2016a, 58–62. For the interpretation of some pieces of the Zemianský Vrbovok Treasure (Hung. Nemesvarbók, Slovakia) as diplomatic gifts, see Bálint 2010, 621 notes 1816–1817; Somogyi 2008, 373–374 note 158.

218 A point earlier noted by Vida 2016b, 256–257; Szenthe 2015, 357–358; Szenthe 2019, 217–221.

219 Kunbábony, Grave 1: Curta 2016; Csiky–Magyar-Hárshegyi 2015, 176 (amphora); Rácz–Horváth 2019, 81 (buckle). Kunágota: Bollók–Szenthe 2018 (gold sheets); Lőrinczy 2019, 183 (pendants). Kiskőrös: Rácz–Horváth 2019, 81.

220 László 1955 (textile decorated with gold strips); Somogyi 2012 (earring).

221 For the date of the Kunágota and Ozora belt sets, see Martin 2008, 165–166 (between 650–675); Daim–Rácz 2003 (suggesting a date of 600–630 for the Kunágota belt); Prohászka 2010, 244 (the worn condition of the Ozora belt set).

222 For the differences compared to the group residing in the Danube-Tisza interfluve and their implications in relation to the Kunágota assemblage, see Lőrinczy 2019.

223 Kiss 1995, 140 (for the burial locations in the eastern Balkans); Bóna 1970 (for the Ozora-Igar group); Szenthe 2019, 217 (for the Kunbábony-Kunágota-Ozora group), cf. also Szenthe 2015.

224 Theophylactus Simocattes, *Historiae* VII.8.16–17: Whitby–Whitby 1986, 191 (English). For the dating of the event, see Pohl 2018, 93; for a different chronology, see Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 107–108. For the uncertainties in the location of where the newcomers had been allotted land, see Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 108; Olajos 2012b, 250, note 1257.

225 Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 6171 = 678/679 AD: Mango–Scott 1997, 498 (English); Nicephorus Constantinopolitanus, *Breviarium* 35: Mango 1980, 88–89 (Greek/English). For the uncertainties in dating these events, see Somogyi 2008, 358–361.

226 As suggested by Csilla Balogh (2019b) based on her analysis of the archaeological record in the Danube-Tisza interfluve.

227 For a critical look at the association of the onset of the Middle Avar period with the arrival of Kuvrat's son to the Carpathian Basin, see Bálint 2008.

228 For the northward shift of the settlement territory, see Samu–Blay 2019; for the internal social transformation, see Szenthe 2014; Szenthe 2019.

229 Kossack 1974; Veit 2005; for the interpretation of these lavishly outfitted Avar-period burials along the lines of the *Prunkgrab* model, see the studies cited in note 218.

230 For a partly different interpretation of Grave 1 of Kunbábony, see Daim 2017; Samu–Daim 2017–2018, 234–235. For the interpretation of the Kunbábony burial as a metaphor for a treasury, see Balogh 2019a.

231 See, e.g., Gavrituchin 2008, 87; Szenthe 2015, 357–358; Szenthe 2019, 217–221.

232 Nicephorus Constantinopolitanus, *Breviarium* 22: Mango 1980, 70–71 (Greek/English) (for Kuvrat); Somogyi 2008, 374 (for the gold received by Kuvrat).

233 For the chronology of these burials and sacrificial assemblages and the debates over their association with ethnic groups, see Komar 2006; Gavrituchin 2008.

234 A "world crisis", to use a phrase by Howard-Johnston 2010b.

235 Kradin 2015, 25. For the role of valuable foreign articles, diplomatic gifts among them, as tokens of prestige, see Brown 2018.

236 Skaff 2012, 146, 221–222, 268–269 (Bilge khagan's policy); Stark 2015, 490–493 (the archaeological finds). The quotes: Bilge Khagan (North 5) = Kül Tegin (South 5): Tekin 1968, 231, 261 (Old Turkic/English).

237 For comprehensive overviews, see Vida 2018a; Bálint 2019; Blay 2020; Samu 2020.

238 However, the distribution of Byzantine gold coins in the west belies this assumption (Somogyi 2014). For a discussion of the western connections of the region's communities before the Avar period, see Koncz 2019.

239 Skaff 2012, 172; Di Cosmo 2015, 66.

240 For the plundered burial, see Müller 2000. The Civezzano-type belt set of the Jankovich Collection points to a similar social group: Vida 2000.

241 Kiss 2001; Hajnal 2012; Vida 2018a.

242 As assumed by Kiss 2001, 388.

243 See the masterful analysis by Vida 2018b.

244 Turner 1980.

245 Somogyi 2008.

246 Szenthe 2014; Szenthe 2019.

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Ádám Bollók

A Century of Gold

The Rise and Glory of the Avar Khaganate in the Carpathian Basin

Hereditas Archaeologica Hungariae

The first century of the Avar Khaganate in the Carpathian Basin saw an extraordinary abundance of gold that is amply attested in the archaeological record: the burials dating from this period are lavishly furnished with gold articles and other precious objects. Migrating from their Asian homeland first to the Eastern European steppe region and thence to the Carpathian Basin in the 550–560s, the Avars forged a multi-ethnic empire within the span of a decade. The rise and glory of the Avar Khaganate, which coincided with the last century of Late Antiquity, was grounded in the fortuitous constellation of several circumstances. Bayan, the first khagan of the Avars' European history known by name, was a charismatic ruler in the history of the steppe, whose leadership qualities were vital to the military achievements of his people. Upon their arrival to Europe, the Avars found an ally in the lords of the Eastern Roman Empire who, hoping that the new military power would curb their neighbours threatening their northern frontier, were willing to assist them. They gladly oiled the new alliance with gold and extravagant gifts. Bolstered with the Eastern Roman subsidies, the Avars subdued Eastern Europe and the diverse communities living in the Carpathian Basin. By uniting the strength of the vanquished peoples, the Avars built a powerful polity which through pressure and military campaigns successfully forced the Eastern Roman administration to pay increasingly larger tributes. This extorted wealth had a major impact on the Avar Khaganate's social organisation as well as on the material culture of its communities. The present volume marshals the data from a wide array of written sources and the archaeological record to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of this process and of the insights that can be drawn from it.

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