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BYZANTINE DIPLOMACY DURING THE GREAT MIGRATION PERIOD

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Abstract:
This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the foreign policy and diplomatic relations of the Byzantine Empire during the period of the Great Migration, as well as the historical significance of the works of the Byzantine diplomats and historians Priscus of Panium and Menander Protector for the study of these subjects. Drawing on historical sources, it examines the Empire's diplomatic relations with the Huns, Goths, Avars, Slavs, the Turkic Khaganate, and other nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples, with particular attention to diplomatic missions, negotiation processes, and diplomatic ceremonies. Furthermore, the article analyzes the foreign policy strategies, distinctive features of international relations, and diplomatic practices reflected in the works of these authors, highlighting their value as historical sources and their significance in contemporary historiography. These studies contribute to a deeper understanding of the formation and development of Byzantine diplomacy, the mechanisms through which the Empire pursued its foreign policy interests, and the historical characteristics of political and diplomatic relations among peoples and states.

Keywords: Attila, Avars, Byzantine Diplomacy, Byzantine Empire, Byzantine Envoys, Dizabul, Foreign Policy, Great Migration Period, Huns, Menander Protector, Priscus of Panium, Sasanian Empire, Turkic Khaganate.

INTRODUCTION

The Byzantine Empire's prolonged position at the center of complex international conflicts and geopolitical rivalries laid the foundation for the development of a sophisticated diplomatic system at an early stage, earlier than in many other European states. Continuing the diplomatic traditions of the Late Roman Empire, Byzantium systematically refined its foreign policy practices, established an extensive diplomatic service, and recruited knowledgeable and skilled specialists in this field. In particular, the intensification of barbarian incursions into Roman territories from the third and fourth centuries, followed by a further escalation of these processes from the late fourth century onward, complicated the Empire's foreign policy environment and created a pressing need for effective diplomatic strategies.

Operating within a complex geopolitical environment surrounded by various barbarian tribes, the Byzantine Empire sought not only to defend its territories against external threats but also to safeguard its interests by establishing political and diplomatic relations with neighboring peoples. To this end, the Byzantines systematically studied the internal political structures, customs, military capabilities, economic and trade relations, mutual interactions, and conflicts of barbarian tribes. Particular attention was also devoted to identifying influential individuals within these tribes and confederations, assessing their political standing and interests, and exploring opportunities to secure their allegiance through various diplomatic means. The information collected enabled Byzantine rulers and diplomatic circles to gain a deeper understanding of the political processes among neighboring peoples, assess the international situation, and formulate appropriate strategic decisions.

On the basis of this experience, Byzantine diplomacy developed a distinctive political and diplomatic approach aimed at regulating relations with barbarian tribes, maintaining a balance of power among them, and exploiting emerging conflicts in the interests of the Empire. Accordingly, one of the defining characteristics of Byzantine diplomacy was its comprehensive use of various instruments, including military force, negotiations, diplomatic missions, political agreements, and the maintenance of a balance among rival powers. These factors played a significant role in enabling the Empire to preserve its political position and advance its foreign policy interests under complex international conditions.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

The Byzantines were compelled not only to defend themselves against the barbarians but also to establish political and diplomatic relations with them. Thus, interaction between Byzantium and the barbarian world was not limited to military confrontation; it also contributed to the development of diplomatic practices. Historical sources, particularly the works of the fifth-century diplomat Priscus of Panium, are of considerable importance for studying the

foreign policy of the Byzantine Empire and its relations with neighboring peoples. During the reign of Emperor Theodosius II (408–450), Priscus entered state service and became the secretary and close adviser of Maximinus, a prominent imperial official. According to Priscus, by the late 440s, the Hunnic state under Attila had emerged as a formidable political and military power. The rulers of Rome and Constantinople dispatched envoys bearing valuable gifts in an effort to secure Attila's favor. They also sought to use the Huns' military strength as a means of maintaining the balance of power against other barbarian tribes. The Eastern Roman Empire, in particular, attached great importance to strengthening relations with the Huns amid external threats posed by the Sasanian Empire, the Vandals, and Arab and Ethiopian groups. Against this complex international backdrop, in 448, Emperor Theodosius II dispatched an embassy led by Maximinus to Attila's court in Pannonia. Priscus accompanied the mission and systematically recorded the events he observed during the journey and at the residence of the Hunnic ruler. Although the official purpose of the embassy was to conclude a treaty of peace and friendship, its secret objective was to assassinate Attila. In this respect, Priscus's accounts constitute an important historical source for examining the objectives and methods of Byzantine diplomacy, as well as the complex nature of the Empire's relations with the Huns. Priscus provides a detailed account of this diplomatic mission. Attila had sent an embassy to Constantinople accompanied by Edikon, a fellow Hun, and Orestes, a Roman who lived in one of the territories recently brought under Attila's control. The details of this mission clearly illustrate the complexity and, at times, duplicity of Byzantine foreign policy. Certain imperial officials attempted to persuade Edikon to assassinate Attila, promising him substantial wealth in return. Edikon, however, merely pretended to accept their proposal. One of the principal organizers of the plot was Vigilas, who was fluent in the Hunnic language. The embassy, in which Vigilas himself participated, subsequently set out for the land of the Huns. Upon reaching their destination, however, Edikon informed Attila of the conspiracy. Nevertheless, Attila refrained from executing Vigilas, choosing to respect the diplomatic privileges of the embassy. He reportedly remarked that, had it not been for the inviolability of diplomatic envoys, Vigilas should have been impaled on a stake and left for the birds to devour his flesh. [1] Priscus emphasizes that although Attila was aware of the plot to assassinate him, he nevertheless maintained diplomatic relations with Byzantium and reached an agreement with Maximinus. The author portrays Attila not merely as a nomadic ruler but as a statesman who understood his political standing, sought hegemony on the international stage, and skillfully combined diplomacy with military power. This demonstrates that Priscus sought not only to recount historical events but also to reveal the underlying causes behind them.

Priscus's notes, recorded in the form of a diary, later served as the basis for his renowned work entitled The History of Byzantium and the Deeds of Attila, which consisted of eight books. Although the work has not survived in its entirety, fragments preserved in the writings of Evagrius, Jordanes, and Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus constitute important historical sources for the study of Byzantine diplomacy and Hunnic history. Priscus's historical narrative covered events from 411 to 472. It provides an account of the political developments of the fifth century, the foreign policy of the Byzantine Empire, and its diplomatic relations with the Huns.

Priscus's accounts of diplomatic relations between the Byzantine Empire and the "barbarian" peoples are of considerable scholarly significance. He provides a detailed account of the mechanisms underlying fifth-century diplomatic practice, including the rights and obligations of envoys, the organizational structure of diplomatic institutions, reception ceremonies, and certain legal norms governing international relations. The exchange of gifts and mutual hospitality played an important role in Byzantine diplomacy and, subsequently, in the diplomacy of the barbarian kingdoms. According to Priscus, the imperial court sent valuable gifts to Attila and his entourage in an effort to preserve peace. Gifts were distributed strictly according to rank and consisted of items that were rare and highly prized among the barbarians. Attila was presented with 6,000 librae of gold, his envoys received silk garments and precious stones, while Bleda's widow was given silver vessels, red hides, Indian pepper, and dates in appreciation of her hospitality [2]. These gifts served not only as a means of preserving peace and strengthening political relations but also enabled Attila to reward his associates. Priscus interprets such Byzantine concessions as evidence of the Empire's declining prestige and political weakness, as well as Attila's ambition to assert his superiority over the emperor.

According to Priscus, the rank and titles of diplomatic envoys in Byzantine diplomacy were determined in accordance with the political power and international standing of the states involved. Attila demanded that high-ranking envoys holding consular titles be regularly sent to his court. Under pressure from the Hunnic ruler, Byzantium was sometimes compelled to depart from its traditional diplomatic hierarchy and dispatch envoys of a higher rank than usual to Attila's court. This demonstrates the growing international prestige of the Hunnic state and highlights the status of diplomatic representatives as an important instrument for expressing political influence and asserting superiority in interstate relations. The Byzantine Empire's foreign policy reached a period of significant expansion during the reign of Emperor Justinian I. His policy of restoring the Roman Empire required extensive diplomatic activity. As part of its strategy to reconquer the western territories, the Empire sought to maintain stability along its eastern and northern frontiers. To this end, particular emphasis was placed on limiting military confrontations with the Sasanian Empire, concluding truces, and maintaining a diplomatic balance. Furthermore, the Empire sought to strengthen its military security and weaken the ties among rival powers by controlling the barbarian tribes along the Danube, undermining their strength or winning them over, and establishing new alliances. [3] The works of the Byzantine historian Menander preserve accounts of Byzantine–Turkic relations in the sixth century, particularly diplomatic contacts with the Turkic Khagan Dizabul, a name used to refer to Istemi. According to Menander, the Byzantine emperor Justin II (565–578) sent an envoy to the court of the Turkic Khagan Dizabul. The envoy's primary objective was to persuade the Turks to

cooperate with Byzantium in joint military action against its principal adversaries, the Sasanian Empire and the Avars. [4]

During the reign of Justinian I, various foreign policy strategies were employed in relations with Persia, ranging from attempts to achieve decisive military victories to efforts to contain its power. After ascending the throne, Justin II sought to weaken Persia primarily through diplomatic means [5]. To this end, he began searching for a powerful partner willing to fight a common enemy, rather than a temporary ally motivated by financial incentives. Consequently, the Turkic Khaganate became one of Byzantium's key foreign policy partners. The works of the historian Menander provide detailed accounts of diplomatic exchanges between the Byzantine emperor and the Turkic khagans. According to Menander, the initiative to establish an alliance with Byzantium came from the Turks themselves, despite the fact that the two powers were not direct neighbors. [6]. Usually, Byzantine envoys proposed forming military alliances with distant peoples. This time, however, the Turkic Khagan took the initiative and, on Maniax's advice, decided to establish contact with the Byzantine Empire. His aim was to sell silk directly and find an ally against Sasanian Persia. The embassy, led by Maniax and assisted by the Alans, traveled through the Caucasus and reached Constantinople.[7]

In August 569, Emperor Justin II sent an embassy led by Zemarchus to the Turkic Khagan. Its aim was to establish diplomatic and trade relations and strengthen the alliance against Persia. Concerned about this alliance, the Persians bribed the Alans in an attempt to eliminate the envoys. However, the embassy overcame these dangers and reached the Khagan's residence on Mount Ektag. [8]. During their journey, the Byzantine envoys met with the Sogdians and local shamans. The Sogdians offered to trade iron, while the shamans performed a purification ritual for Zemarchus and his companions. The envoys were then guided to Dizabul's residence on Mount Ektag. The Khagan received them immediately as a sign of respect. According to Menander, since grapes did not grow in the Turkic lands, the envoys were served another sweet drink instead of grape wine. The feast continued the following day in a luxurious tent decorated with silk.[9]. Menander describes Dizabul as a ruler who paid great attention to foreign policy. During lengthy negotiations, the benefits of an alliance with the Byzantine Empire were discussed. Dizabul also demanded financial payments from Constantinople, and the Byzantines agreed to pay the Turks a certain sum. Menander details these negotiations, highlighting the envoys' diplomatic efforts. Zemarchus's embassy established the first official contacts between Byzantium and the Turks, laying the foundation for future relations.

After the negotiations, Zemarchus and twelve attendants joined Dizabul's campaign against the Persians, while the remaining Byzantine envoys returned home. In 572, the Turkic ruler declared war on Persia, and the Byzantines also launched a war against the Persians that lasted twenty years (572–591). [10]. According to Menander, the Turks sent seven embassies to Byzantium before 576. During the reign of Tiberius (578–582), a Byzantine embassy led by Valentin was sent to the Turkic Khaganate. The envoys were received by Turksanf (575–603), the son of Dizabul. According to Menander, he accused the Byzantines of violating the 569 agreement by forming an alliance with the Avars. The Avars had been subjects of the Turks but later fled westward. Valentin explained that the Avars had requested permission from Byzantium to occupy Pannonia, but their request had been rejected. Nevertheless, the Avars established a strong foothold in Pannonia and achieved several victories over the Byzantines. As a result, Byzantium was forced to conclude a truce with them in 570. These events brought significant changes to the balance of political power in the region. The Turks along the Volga were surrounded by tribes they had only recently subjugated. The continued submission of these tribes was largely due to the lack of worthy opponents capable of challenging the heavily armed Turkic cavalry. The unexpected rise of Avar power created a new political centre for all the Turkic Khaganate's rivals, particularly the Kutrigurs. After concluding a truce with Byzantium, securing their own safety, and becoming a powerful state, the Avars fundamentally changed the political situation. The Turks could no longer ignore the threat posed by their growing power. Whereas the previous embassy had been received relatively warmly, the reception this time was entirely different. [11] The last embassy sent by the Turks to Constantinople took place in 598, during the reign of Emperor Maurice, on behalf of the Western Turkic Khagan. By this time, the Turkic Khaganate had split into two independent political entities: the Eastern Turkic Khaganate and the Western Turkic Khaganate. This diplomatic mission was intended to preserve and strengthen the alliance between the Western Turkic Khaganate and the Byzantine Empire.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the works of Priscus of Panium and Menander Protector are important written sources for studying Byzantine diplomacy, its foreign policy priorities, and international relations in the fifth and sixth centuries. These works provide an opportunity to analyse the substance, forms, and practical mechanisms of diplomatic activity. Priscus of Panium's account of the embassy to Attila's court is particularly significant for studying the political relations between Byzantium and the Huns in the fifth century, as well as diplomatic practices and ceremonial protocols. The author's personal observations and accounts as a direct participant in the events enhance the historical value of his work. His detailed descriptions of the political environment, relations between rulers, and diplomatic conventions provide valuable insights into the distinctive features of Byzantine foreign policy. Menander Protector's *History* is of considerable scholarly importance for examining Byzantium's relations with the Turkic Khaganate and Sasanian Persia in the sixth century. It covers diplomatic missions, negotiations, military and political alliances, commercial interests, and geopolitical rivalry. In particular, its accounts of Byzantine–Turkic relations shed light on the development of cooperation between the two powers, the political significance of the silk trade, and the reasons behind their diplomatic rapprochement against Sasanian Persia. Alongside the political dimensions of diplomatic relations, Menander's work also addresses practical aspects such as diplomatic ceremonies, protocol, negotiation methods, and intelligence gathering. Furthermore, its

information on the political structure, customs, religious beliefs, and diplomatic traditions of the Turks is of considerable value for studying the political and cultural history of the peoples of Central Asia in the sixth century. Overall, the works of these authors provide an important scholarly foundation for the comparative study of the development of Byzantine foreign policy, the formation of interstate relations, and the distinctive features of diplomatic practice. A comparative and critical analysis of these texts alongside other Byzantine, Eastern, and Western written sources helps to assess historical events more objectively, identify the causes and consequences of diplomatic relations, and develop a deeper understanding of international political processes in the fifth and sixth centuries. Therefore, the works of Priscus of Panium and Menander Protector are essential not only for studying the history of Byzantine diplomacy but also for investigating the evolution of international relations and diplomatic traditions during the transition from antiquity to the early Middle Ages.

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