

THE NATURE OF TURKO-BYZANTINE RELATIONS IN THE SIXTH CENTURY AD

HATİCE ERDEMİR

Sources

As far as we know, the Romans and the Turks knew about each other but they did not have contact before the time of Justinus II, or even if they did have contact, there is no evidence to suggest the level of their relationship.

Greek and Roman notions of central Asia were very fanciful- and Herodotus is good evidence for this. Herodotus does provide us with information on central Asia, but there is nothing obviously relevant to the Turks. Although the word 'Turks' did not exist at this time, this does not entail that the Turkish nation as such was not in existence¹. The reason for this was that the name "Turk" and the "Turks" had appeared in the sixth century in the north of Persia as one of the strong adversaries of the Persians.

Therefore the emphasis of this paper will be mainly on the nature of the Turko-Byzantine relations and also the effect of these relations on the Byzantine Empire in the second half of the sixth century.

Here not having sufficient Turkish sources² devoted to this subject, naturally makes it difficult to know to what extent the Turks knew about the Romans. The Orkhon inscriptions alone enlighten the period of the Göktürk State (552-734). But, even these inscriptions do not give us clear and direct information about Byzantium. When Bilge Khagan describes his great grandfather Bumin and Istemi (Sizabul) Khagan's actions and the

¹ Sinor, *Early Inner Asia*, 285.. The name 'Turk' and Turkish language has not been traced with absolute certainty by scholars before the sixth century AD. In Tabari (*Noldeke*, 53). according to translator the name "Turk" and the "Turks" had appeared in the sixth century in the north of Persia as one of the strong adversaries of the Persians.

² Historical and archeological research is still continuing in the region of Orkhon and there are some more small inscriptions which still have not been read. New research in this area may provide sufficient information for the historiographers but this is unclear.

border of the Turkish State, he often mentions that the Turks went westward³ as far as Demirkapı⁴ and it therefore seems that this was the edge of the Turkish State in the west, a natural border for the triangle of Persia, the Byzantine Empire and the Göktürk State. In any case since these inscriptions do not mention Turko-Byzantine relationship in depth one can say that the Turks were affected less by the Romans than they had been in the east by China and other tribes.

During the time of Justinianus, although Procopius' *Wars* mention China, India, and the geography of the trade roads and also the Hephthalites who were the neighbours of the Turks in the east at that time, no mention of the Turks and central Asia is made at all. It is clear that the Byzantine Empire's interest was not in the heart of Asia, as they were more concerned with the west in that period and they had enough problem with Persia in the east. Also the Hephthalites were the eastern nation relevant to Persia.

The information provided by Menandros fills the gap left by the lack of further inscriptions. He explains that when between 569 and 571 the Byzantine envoy was returning from Turkish territory to Byzantium with a Turkish embassy, the leader of some Turkish tribes begged Khagan Sizabul to send some of their own people to see the Romans⁵. This information is of value in that either the Turks had limited data regarding Byzantium and its people or the Turks had heard something about them from their neighbour states and other tribes and they were very curious to know about this Empire and its people.

However, the Turks and their customs, traditions, moral values, and some characteristics were beginning to be observed and mentioned in Menandros' *Protector* (558-582). Theophlactus Simocattes continued to observe the Turks and wrote something about them in his *History*. This information was later supplemented by Emperor Maurice's *Strategicon*.

³ Orhun Abideleri, Bilge, Dogu 8.

⁴ In the west of the Göktürk State, there was a range of mountain which was very difficult to pass through. According to rumour, the Iron Gate was built by Alexander the Great's soldiers from iron and brass to make easier to pass through this huge and long chain of mountain and to prevent the barbaric Gog and Magog from coming in. Anderson, *Iron Gate*, 1932, 21-23.

⁵ Menandros, X. 4, 1-7.

According to Menandros, we know that there were 106 Turks in residence at Constantinople⁶ in 575-576, after the first diplomatic contacts a decade earlier than Tardu⁷ and there was probably a regular interchange in the early 570's as well. But unfortunately a lack of sources means we are unaware of the Turkish attitude towards the Byzantine Empire. From Menandros we are informed that the Turks discovered the location of their so-called slaves, the Varchonites or Avars, and that Turkic groups were now campaigning as far west as the Crimean peninsula. The Turks also know something about the geography of the Byzantine Empire, since Tardu could discuss the different means of access⁸.

According to Sinor⁹ it was after the establishment of the Turkish State in the east in 552 that the Byzantine Empire would have heard of the Turks and soon afterwards Byzantium initiated a diplomatic policy towards the Turks. I am agree in that the Orkhon inscription, mentions that there was a Byzantine envoy in the funeral of Turkish Kagan Bumin in 553. This meant that, the Romans met with the Turks in their homeland in Inner Asia right after the establishment of Göktürk State¹⁰. The Turks also became relevant to the Romans after the destruction of the Hephthalite Kingdom. It was after this incident that "Justinus II would show great interest in knowing more about the peoples conquered by the Turks, among them the Hephthalites and more particularly the Avars, with whom he had more than his due share of trouble". Hence the Turks appeared in Byzantine history.

We might consider that some of the tribes who lived to the north of the Black-Sea, could be the bearers of information between the Turks and Byzantium. But these tribes such as the Huns, the Utigurs, the Qutrigurs and the Avars were rather a block before the rise of the Turks as a power in the east in 552. The Turks and Byzantines were not interested in each other

⁶ Menandros, XIX. 1, 5-7.

⁷ Menandros, XIX. 1, Although Menandros does not provide any name for Turxanthus, Haussig proves that the word 'Turxanthus' was a title of Turkish rulers under the supreme Khagan. The real name of Turkish ruler whom Valentinus met was 'Tardu', Haussig, "*Exkurs*", 369, 374-75, 418.

⁸ Menandros, XIX. 1, 70-80.

⁹ Sinor, "*Early Inner Asia*", 303.

¹⁰ Orhun Abideleri, Kültigin, Doğu 3-5. For technical reading and interpretation of the word Rum (*Apurım, Porom, Purım*) in the Orkhon inscription see, Kafesoğlu, *Türk Milli Kültürü*, İstanbul 1986, 97, especially fn. 282. See also, Sertkaya, "*Türk Kültürü*", Ankara 1995, 134-152.

because of these nomadic groups demanded their immediate concern. These tribes might also have filtered distorted information.

A good example of the role Hephthalites as the centre of information was that in 568 the Sogdian leader Maniakh could suggest to Sizabul that he approach the Romans to sell silk to the Byzantine Empire. This shows the importance of the Hephthalites in carrying information between the Turks and Byzantium. The Hephthalites did not only carry information, they actually showed the Turks how they contact the Byzantine Empire which they already knew.

The Romans knew about the Hephthalites and vice-versa because Roman envoys had been in Bactria at the time of the Persian king Peroz's campaign against the Hephthalites. The territory of the Hephthalites lay "immediately to the north of Persia",¹¹ but that was before the rise of the Turks.

Probably the first known Turko-Byzantine contact provided the beginning of reliable information. We will accept the Turkish envoy in 568-569¹² as the beginning of accurate information between these two nations.

The First Contacts Between the Turks and Byzantium and the Reasons for These

As far as we can understand from Menandros, direct diplomatic contacts between Byzantium and the Turks had begun with a request from the Turkish Khagan at the beginning of the fourth year of Justinus' reign in 568. The power of the Turks had increased in Middle Asia at that time and they dominated the Sogdians, who had earlier been subjects of the Hephthalites, and in this way they extended their border to Persia. The Sogdians, who needed to find a silk market for their product had to obtain Turkish permission, to sell it to the Persians. The Turkish Khagan Sizabul,¹³ in agreement with the Hephthalite leader Maniakh, had sent an envoy to the Persian king desiring him to allow the Sogdian merchants to sell their silk to the Persians. As the master of the Sogdians, the Turkish interest was to meet

¹¹ Procopius, *Wars*, I, iii., 1-3.

¹² Manandros, X, 1, 1-2.

¹³ Dizabul or İstemi in Turkish sources or Sinjibu in Arabic sources. This Turkish ruler could be the person who was mentioned as "İstemi" at that time in Orkhon inscriptions. For detailed information see; Haussig, "Exkurs", 332; Sinor, *Early Inner Asia*, 290.

the Sogdians' needs on this matter and consequently the Turks had prepared an embassy to send to the Persians.

At the first negotiations, the Persians reacted bitterly against the Turkish embassy by burning the silk in front of their eyes¹⁴. The second Turkish envoy was also badly received and poisoned by the Persians, who gave the cause of the death of some of the envoys stifling because of the dryness of Persian weather. However, the Turkish Khagan Sizabul recognised this as a trick of the Persians¹⁵.

In spite of the Turks wanting to have a friendly relations with the Persians, no respect was shown to the Turkish embassies and they were in discomfort sent back. The Persians were not alone in treating the Turks badly, since the Hephthalite Katulph was the Persian mentor. Katulph had been trying to get revenge for the capturing of his land and the raping of his wife by the Hephthalite King who was the subject of the Turks and Katulph had then betrayed his country to the Turks. For this reason he had allied with the Persians and given advice to Khosro not to allow the Turks to carry out their aims¹⁶. The Göktürk State had already expanded to become the major power of central Asia:¹⁷ its subjugation of the Hephthalite had brought it into direct contact with the Persians, and its interest in the Avars would ensure that its attention was also drawn westwards, towards the Byzantium. The universalist aspiration of the Khagan on revealed in the preface to the letter to the emperor Maurice, quoted in Theophylact "To the king of the Romans, the Chagan, the great lord of seven races and master of seven zones of the world."¹⁸ In addition, control of the Silk Road would increase the economic power of the Turks. Naturally, Persia would not close its eyes to this significant expansion of the Turks and also would not like to

¹⁴ Menandros, X. 1, 5-20, Moravcsik, " *Byzantinoturcica*", 254-257.

¹⁵ Menandros, X. 1, 25-45.

¹⁶ Menandros, X. 1, 15-20.

¹⁷ Bilge Khagan gives the extreme point of the state border adding that in the east he arrived at Shantug Plato, very close to the sea [this would be the Pacific Ocean]; they were very close to Tibet in the south, in the west they had passed over the river İnci [Pearl] arriving at Demirkaptı, and in the north they reached Yır Bayurkı. Orhun Abideleri, Kuzey 3; Theophylact Simocatta, VII. 7. 4-11, tells how the Turks influenced the east, how they conquered the Hephthalites in 558 and became neighbours of the Persians, and after that how they came near to the Byzantine Empire by capturing the Avar territory.

¹⁸ Theophylact Simocatta, VII.7.8.

see any other rival nation acting as middleman between the east and the west.

These unsuccessful contacts between the Turks and the Persians were the turning point for the beginning of the diplomatic contacts between the Turks and Byzantium. Apparently, the Turks had wanted to be allies of the Persians. The reason for this was the possibility of taxing the caravan trade in Sogdian silk, but they had failed to carry out their aims. Now, the Turks and Byzantium, these entirely different nations from different continents and climates, would become allies against the same enemy, namely the Persians. The journey was long, unfamiliar and dangerous. Although the Turks had some vague information about Byzantium they were not familiar with the route which runs around the north of the Black-Sea. For the Turks, even after the Caucasus passes there were many obstacles to their arriving in Byzantium. In fact there were three possible means of access from the eastern edge of the Black-Sea to Byzantium. According to Menandros, by the time Turkish embassy reached Byzantium they had "travelled very many roads and traversed very many lands, over huge mountains reaching near the clouds, through plains and woods, over marshes and rivers. Then they crossed the Caucasus and finally came to Byzantium."¹⁹ Quite apart from the distance this road was not secure for the Turks, because the Turks lived as various individual tribes under a chief ruler²⁰ and the relationships of tribes with each other were not always very good.

Maniakh the leader of the Sogdians knew the Romans and suggested to the Turkish Khagan Sizabul that friendship with the Romans would be an advantage and they could then sell their silk directly to the Romans. After this advice Sizabul sent Maniakh to the Byzantine Empire with his embassy taking valuable gifts and a letter from him (568-569). Justinus II accepted the Turkish embassy, showing his esteem for them, and he also asked Maniakh some questions. Justinus seemed to want to identify their common enemies. At the same time the Turkish envoy asked Justinus II for peace and an offensive alliance between the Turks and the Romans.

¹⁹ Menandros, X. 1, 55-65.

²⁰ Menandros, XIX. 1, 27-30. The fact that individual tribes within the Göktürk State were constantly rebelling and fighting among themselves made this route difficult.

Justinus accepted this because he was more anxious about his western frontier²¹. In particular after the 450's the Byzantine Empire had been squeezed from both the east and the west. Therefore, the Empire had to construct different policies for these enemies, those in the west and its traditional adversary in the east. So the Byzantine Empire tried to follow a kind of 'equilibrium policy' amid these disturbances. When the Byzantine Empire was 'making peace treaties in its international and inter-state relations'²² in the east, it followed a defensive²³ policy in the west in the Balkans for the security and continuity of the Empire. In this problematic situation the proposed alliance with the Turks would provide Justinus with a good opportunity for to realise his aims.

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²¹ "Father Justinianus, light of the city and the world are you leaving your beloved palace? Are you abandoning your relatives, your servants and so many subjects? Do you think nothing of your lands? Have you no thought for the weary world? See, the Avars, and the harsh Franks, and the Gepids and the Goths, and so many other races are raising their standards all around and preparing for war. With what force shall we subdue such great enemies when you are lying dead, strength of Rome?" Corripus, "Justini", I, 250-57. These words are enough to reveal Justinus' anxiety about the Empire's enemies as well as his love for his "father" when Justinianus died.

²² Chrysos, "Diplomacy", 25-41.

²³ Ostrogorsky, "History", 82.

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