

BARBARIAN ENVOYS AT BYZANTIUM IN THE 6TH CENTURY

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Abstract. *The byzantine diplomacy has been for long time an object for the historical research, its efficiency being considered one of the explanations for the so long survival of the Empire. The barbarian embassies sent to Constantinople were studied mainly in the context of general discussions on byzantine diplomacy.*

We intend to focus on the possibility of deciphering a barbaric point of view regarding the relations with the Byzantine Empire, at the beginning of the Middle Ages, when the narrative sources that are available to us have a Byzantine origin, or, when referring to barbarian kingdoms in the West, they are profoundly influenced by Roman and Roman-Byzantine traditions.

Keywords: *Byzantine diplomacy, barbarian embassies, diplomatic envoys, narrative sources.*

We intend to use for our analysis the narrative sources from the 6th century, because this period represents a turning point in the military and political situation of the Byzantine Empire and most of that we know about it derives from chronicles and histories¹. Old and new enemies confronted the imperial power, especially during the huge effort of reconquest made by Justinian and the relations weren't always of confrontation, but also diplomatic ones. We propose to try to adopt the point of view of the barbarians who send envoys to Constantinople or who participate to negotiations with the Byzantines, which is a very difficult attempt. The byzantine diplomacy was very often studied, but that of post-Roman barbarian kingdoms from the

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¹ We use the term "narrative sources" because the historical writings in the Middle Ages represent a kind of federation of subgenres, "the boundaries between which are notably unclear", to cite Lake, 2014, 345.

Occident entered the attention of academics only recently and partially². Also, the envoys that came to Byzantium from the East were studied only in the context of the attention paid to the imperial diplomacy³. When it comes to Western Barbarians, we have some narrative sources written in the successor kingdoms, but usually, we can know something about the Eastern barbarian embassies or envoys only from Byzantine sources, which pose the problem of the bias of the authors. But even if we use Byzantine sources to discuss the Barbarian embassies we can stress some specificities of the societies the envoys came from, some aspects of the Byzantine diplomacy, and more often some Byzantine ideas and stereotypes.

The most important methodological problem is how to decipher a Barbarian point of view in sources written by Byzantines or by very Romanized Latin authors. Also, we can not always give weight to the information about Barbarians presented in the narrative sources, because the authors were often politically motivated or tried to hide internal controversies and not to offer valid data about the strangers, because they use the Barbarians as a mirror for the Byzantine society⁴. It is true that the authors interested by ethnography have sometimes transmitted a barbarian point of view, that some of them admired the Barbarians, and some of them used the strangers to criticise their own society. In Byzantium, the ethnography could have been used with subversive intentions⁵.

But the Byzantines were really curious about foreigners even if they tried to filter new information through old myths and stereotypes⁶. We can find this genuine curiosity in the discussion between Justin II and Turk envoys, when the emperor asked many question about a people who inhabited distant lands and who was not a direct threat or a valuable ally⁷. At the same time, no ally was unimportant from the point of view of Byzantines for whom

² One of the first works on the subject, regarding the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century, is Andrew Gillet, *Envoys and political communication in the late antique west 411-533*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

³ For the recent bibliography on the subject of byzantine diplomacy, see Whately, 2013, 239-254.

⁴ Kaldellis, 2013, 9.

⁵ Ibidem, 10.

⁶ Luttwak, 2009, 145.

⁷ Menander, 1985, 10.9.

the ambassadors were important channels for passing on and obtaining useful information⁸.

If we can find a lot of information about barbarian envoys in the works of Byzantine historians and chroniclers, the Latin authors are less proficient in this respect. But they tell us something about diplomatic missions and envoys and interpret them in accordance with their own literary or political interests.

Representations of barbarian envoys by Byzantine authors can sometimes give rise to digressions or ethnographic notations. However, it must be noted that the historical works dealing with embassies were literary pieces written for a competitive literary scene⁹. They could have an objective form, as the Wars of Procopius or written in the first person, as the diplomatic reports of Priscus Panites¹⁰. The tradition required that the authors use references to classical works as the integration of descriptions, speeches before the battle, and diplomatic speeches of persuasion¹¹.

The sources for studying barbarian embassies could be not only chronicles and histories but also fragments of official diplomatic reports, as those written by Priscus, Zemarchos, and Nonnosus. It is possible that the barbarian envoys presented such reports themselves, once back in their country, but we can suppose that their form was an oral one, because, often, the envoys were of high origin, related to their monarch, and not professional writers. A good example is given in Menander's history, where Yesdegusnap appears, the Persian who negotiates the peace of 562, who is related to the milk-brother of king Peroz¹².

In the Latin West, the most important sources are the chronicles, but there is some information in saints' lives, letters, etc.

So, we can point here to another methodological problem, that of the character of our sources, which are fragmentary and often they note only the most important embassies, or offer

⁸ Drocourt, 2012, 91-112.

⁹ Kaldellis, 2013, 2.

¹⁰ Blockley, 1983.

¹¹ Kaldellis, 2013, 2.

¹² Menander, 6.1. See and Rezakhani, 2008.

insights into the so called „kinship diplomacy” (marriages, baptism, adoptions in arms, etc)¹³.

Taking into consideration all these limitations, our goal is not to realize another reconstruction of byzantine diplomacy, but to show how a particular category of sources, the narratives ones, enlightens the way the Byzantines related to the Others and to themselves.

We shall start with a short presentation of the byzantine diplomacy in the context of the 6th century. If for the Romans force was the most important tool of their government, and diplomacy came second, for the Byzantines it was the opposite. They had a lesser military capacity to face more enemies than the Romans, their society had different values and they disposed of other ways of persuasion, as the orthodox christianity¹⁴. It is possible to assert that Byzantium survived so long also due to a relative prosperity which allowed it to pay off the enemies when war was not possible¹⁵. And although the discussion is stil open, it is said that the Byzantines had a „grand strategy”, as “the setting of the states objectives and of priorities amongst those objectives, allocating resources among them, and choosing the best policy instruments to pursue them”¹⁶.

The narrative sources inform us about various diplomatic channels in use in the 6th century and we may begin with those linking various Western barbarian kings and the Byzantine emperor (and then between Barbarian chiefs and Byzantine generals, during Justinian’s wars). Other channels linked the Byzantine empire and Persia, through peace talks during the wars but also through the exchange of information between the two sovereigns, during the more peaceful periods. Finally, there are informations about diplomatic exchanges between the Byzantine empire and various Oriental peoples.

The basic form of diplomatic communication in this period is the mission. The envoy was a person who represents the political authority from which it was sent and who acts as a vehicle of communication. During this period the oral form of communication was essential, the envoys carried letters which

¹³ Gillet, 2003, 3-4.

¹⁴ Luttwak, 2009, 112.

¹⁵ Whately, 2013, 243.

¹⁶ Kagan, 2006, 348.

were secondary and were only guarantees of their credibility. The letters were used to give them the opportunity to speak to the foreign sovereign. The speech of the envoy is underlying diplomatic relations¹⁷.

What can we learn from analyzing reports about barbarian embassies in the Byzantine world? Sometimes it's the issues that we might consider "objective" and which refer to the actual operation of diplomatic relations at the time.

In terms of duration, narrative sources confirm that these were temporary assignments, because obviously no permanent embassies system existed then. But envoys spent much time at the mission, sometimes several years. From this point of view, some may be considered as a sort of ambassadors, others as a sort of hostages. This may be the situation, presented by Procopius, of the embassy sent by the Ostrogoth King Vitiges to Constantinople at the beginning of his reign, who is allowed to go back only after a few years, and is additionally retained by General Belisarius. He used the Ostrogoth envoys in exchange for a Byzantine ambassador, Petrus Patricius, who was sent to the King Theodat in 533 and could go back to Constantinople only in 540¹⁸.

The narrative sources from the 6th century record, most often, the missions that reach recipients who are far away. The missions sent to great distances were normal in Byzantium but they were less common in the post-Roman world of the West. There are also embassies with military character, moving over very short distances, during the war. Procopius of Caesarea gives numerous examples during the war of reconquest. The war is centered on sieges, therefore negotiations regarding the surrender of besieged towns have a central role in his works¹⁹.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the envoys are in the post-Roman world the voice of kings, due to the multiplicity of political entities existing there. The diplomatic missions can be correlated with the great politics but sometimes also with local politics. I think that the most interesting is a case of the second category, in which a French aristocrat, the representative of a local aristocratic groups, Gontran Boson, goes

¹⁷ Gillet, 2003, p. 4.

¹⁸ Procopius, *Wars*, VI, 22.

¹⁹ Procopius, *BP*, II, 5 ; I, 13 ; II, 8-10.

to Constantinople, in 581-2 to talk to a royal pretender to the throne.

Presenting the complicated history of an usurper, Gundovald, Gregory of Tours helps us to understand how were regarded those who were too close to Byzantium. The duke Gontran Boson was accused of treason by the king Gontran of Burgundy because he went to Constantinople to discuss with Gundovald, a supposed bastard of another Frankish king, Clotar, and to convince him to come back to Gaul and reclaim his inheritance²⁰. Gundovald, who was protected by Maurice, the Byzantine emperor, come back to Gaul with money given by the Byzantine and a civil war begins²¹. So, we can ask ourselves if we can consider Gontran Boson a kind of „conspirators’ ambassador”, who was well received at Constantinople and managed to get some help from the emperor, even if Gregory presents us only his discussion with Gundovald, as related by this one.

Another question we have tried to ask to, using our narrative sources, is: to whom are the envoys sent? In general, we can see that they are sent by sovereigns to other sovereigns.

Sometimes, the sources present more than embassies, events that we may categorize as “official visits at the highest level”. Iordanes describes the visit made by the Visigoth King Athanaric in 381 on January 11 at Constantinople. He is received with pomp by Theodosius which comes to meet him outside the walls of the imperial capital. When Athanaric dies on 25th of January he receives an official funeral organized by the emperor, in the Roman rite, as expression of imperial policy of conciliation with the Goths²².

The interesting but also questionable part of the story written by the historian of gothic origin is the presentation of Athanaric’s reaction, who, seeing the majesty of Constantinople exclaimed dumbfounded that the Emperor must be a god on earth²³. Athanaric's words constitute a clear affirmation of the respect inspired by the imperial power. But they were recorded by Iordanes somewhat in response to the consideration shown by the

²⁰ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 2009 (1916), VII, 14; VII,32.

²¹ Ibidem, VII, 36.

²² Iordanes, 1939, XXXIX, 144. See the interpretation in Wolfram, 1990, 74.

²³ Iordanes, XXVIII, 142.

emperor to the Visigoth king and have been used to demonstrate (during the war of reconquest of Italy from the Ostrogoths) that the agreement between Goths and Byzantines was possible. But even after this period, inviting foreign potentates remains a firmly established practice of Byzantine diplomacy. “The foreign ruler was expected to be overwhelmed by the imperial court’s display of power, thus spreading the fame of the empire’s invincible superiority among his compatriots and other barbarian nations”²⁴.

There are also situations when an envoy can go to Constantinople to discuss with someone else than the Emperor and the person who send the envoy is not always another sovereign. The history of Gundovald that we discussed above presents a situation different from the norm, because a Frankish aristocrat goes to Constantinople to talk not to the Emperor, but to a pretender to the throne of one of the Frankish kingdoms. Gundovald was protected by the Emperor, so Gontran Boso probably made his intention known at the highest level. The pretender come back to Gaul with money given by the Emperor Maurice, so the envoy of the conspirators must have convinced the Byzantine court to support Gundovald, telling everyone that he has some important backing in his country.

Another case of envoys coming not from a legitimate sovereign but from a pretender or a usurper can be found, around the same time (585) in Visigoth Hispania. Gregory of Tours presents the Catholic prince Hermenegild, son of the Arian King Leovigild, rebelled against his father, in a very favourable manner, as a martyr of the faith. We learn from the correspondence of Pope Gregory the Great that Hermenegild sends to Constantinople the Bishop Leander of Seville, asking for help. The Byzantines, in conflict with the Persians, can not help him, but some support comes from the Byzantine commander of Cordoba, whit whom he negotiated, perhaps, as suggested by Gregory of Tours, through his wife, the Frankish princess Ingonda²⁵.

Envoys can be also sent by military leaders in a region which constitutes a war theatre, because the generals had the possibility to negotiate directly with enemies on the battlefield²⁶.

²⁴ Beihammer, 2012, 158.

²⁵ Wolfam, 1997, 267.

²⁶ Gillet, 2003, 9.

Procopius presents the detailed situation of the Ostrogoths who offered to Belisarius, through their envoys, the rule as king of Italy, in 540²⁷. Although many of the statements of Procopius can be put in doubt, this offer could be real, as seems to confirm the coldness shown by Justinian to the victorious general, during the triumph and later. If real, the negotiations were secret, as a kind of closed door diplomacy, in a very complex situation during the byzantine-gothic wars in Italy²⁸. Probably the offer made to the Byzantine general actually expresses the shift in the rather geographically defined identities, which are going beyond ethnic or political criteria. It would seem that it is the wish of the inhabitants of Italy to find a formula that would allow them to retain their own individuality in a state that does not directly depend on the Emperor of Constantinople.

When Belisarius is recalled by Justinian and is preparing to leave, Goths messengers come to him and accuse him that he prefers to be the slave of the Emperor than the king of Italy²⁹. This version of facts can be fairly close to the truth, for Procopius was present beside Belisarius. On the other hand, when he wrote about it he knew that his master was suspected of attempted usurpation and tries to clear the suspicions that hung over him³⁰.

There are countless other less spectacular cases of envoys sent by the local military leaders to the military chiefs from the opposing camp, in the context of a war based on sieges which assumes that at some point the surrender have to be negotiated³¹. The result of such negotiations could be that of the acquisition of the Roman identity by the Goths. They may become Roman by entering the Byzantine army or by accepting to be subjects of the Emperor. Gothic garrisons in Fiesole and Urbino are absorbed into the Byzantine army after the surrender, and those in Osimo, eager to preserve the properties, swear to be faithful subjects of the Emperor. Everything is resolved through complicated negotiations.

The narrative sources confirm the general idea that messengers were also acting in order to provide information to

²⁷Procopius, *BP*, II, 30, 26.

²⁸ Nechaeva, 2012, 188.

²⁹ Procopius, *BG*, V, 30.

³⁰ Cameron, 1985, 188

³¹ Whitby, 2013, 433-462.

those who sent them (to not openly call them spies). Procopius shows how Vitiges sent messengers to besieged Belisarius to ask him to surrender Rome; at their return he requires information about Belisarius and the situation of the Byzantine army³². We can not be certain, in this case, that the Byzantine historian has a way of knowing what the Ostrogoth King discussed with the envoys returned from the Byzantine camp, but he was well aware of the procedures of the time and knew that such interrogations would have been normal to happen.

Menander Protector, who writes in the last quarter of the sixth century, shows how the envoys can be a source of information for those to whom they were sent. The emperor Justin II asks the Turkish messengers who came to Constantinople about their country, leaders, habits and recent events in Central Asia, especially about the Avars³³. From the viewpoint of the Turkish envoys these were considered neutral information and they could be shared - so foreign envoys can be used as a source of information about very distant territories. For the people to whom the envoys belong this is the benign version of a kind of “debriefing”, but they also had their agenda in showing their force and their attitude about the Avars, which they consider former subjects of the Turks³⁴.

A rather malign one is that in which a Byzantine commander manages to find out what were the true and dangerous intentions of the Avar Chagan. The general Justin befriends the Avar envoy Kunimon and is told that the Chagan Baian wants to conquer Moesia. Because of this very useful information, the Byzantines are able to prevent them from crossing the Danube³⁵. In fact, we may be here in the presence of a common practice of the period, that of recruiting double agents from inside the group of envoys and using them as spies³⁶. It was said that the Persian ambassador Isdigousnes (Yesdegusnaph at Menander), about whom Procopius wrote with great antipathy, could have been recruited by Justinian who gives him a great

³² Procopius, *BG*, V, 20.

³³ Menander, 10.9.

³⁴ Nechaeva, 2011, 175-184.

³⁵ Menander, 5.4.

³⁶ The analysis of the intelligence system in this period in the now classical work of A.D. Lee, *Information and Frontiers. Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 1993.

freedom of movement at Constantinople and great sums of money³⁷.

Envoys can be used to set up complex diplomatic games, to build defensive alliance or, most often, offensive ones. Procopius shows how Vitiges besieged in Ravenna sends messengers to the Persians to arouse them against the Empire. He sends envoys who are not Goths but two bribed priests from Liguria, one of them assuming the title of bishop³⁸. The priests had a role in diplomatic communication because they were literate and had the habit of speaking in public, an essential quality in a period characterized by the oratorical nature of the messages. Chosroes is convinced by the envoys to take action against the Byzantines and his armies invade the empire's territory in the spring of 540³⁹. The new threat is considered serious, such as the Gothic embassy sent by Vitiges from the beginning of his reign to Constantinople and held there is sent back with promises of peace. But Belisarius retains it and uses the Gothic envoys in exchange of Petrus Patricius, detained by the Goths as a prisoner from the time of the reign of king Theodat⁴⁰.

The narrative sources confirm that one can not speak of a professionalization of diplomacy during this period, the envoys were recruited from amongst individuals whose career or qualification was different, but in a moment or another they were considered suitable for the mission that has been entrusted upon them. Sometimes the envoys are very high born, as we learn from Menander that the Persian ambassador sent to Dara, on the frontier in 562 to negotiate the 50 years peace with the Byzantines, was the king's chamberlain, "the highest honour amongst the Persians"⁴¹. Sometimes they have received rhetoric training as the most important of Byzantine ambassadors of the 6th century, Petrus Patricius, remembered by Procopius and Menander and whose reports have fragmentary survived,

³⁷ Procopius, *BG*, IV, 15, 19-20. The theory of Isdigousnes being recruited by the Byzantines in Nechaeva, 2004, 143.

³⁸ Procopius, *BP*, II, 2, 4.

³⁹ Dignas, Winter, 2007, 107.

⁴⁰ Procopius, *BG*, VI, 22; Wolfram, 1997, 347.

⁴¹ Menander, 6.1.

confessing his literary abilities⁴². Even a mere interpreter used by the Persians, Paulus, studied at an elementary school in Antioch⁴³.

On the other hand, there are a number of procedures and attitudes that the envoys, regardless of their origin and education should respect. The process of negotiations implies some very precise technicalities that suppose a certain professionalization⁴⁴.

A component *sine qua non* of any embassy appears to be the exchange of gifts. Turks envoys wishing to establish economic, diplomatic and military relations with the Byzantines bring, says Menander, raw silk. The most common and most appreciated gifts were precious objects and weapons⁴⁵. Avar envoys are given money and weapons, but when it becomes known that Chagan wants to invade Byzantine territory, the given weapons are taken back⁴⁶.

Also noteworthy is the significance of this exchange of gifts as reflected by a conversation that Gregory of Tours is said to have had with the King Chilperic. The king has sent ambassadors to the emperor Tiberius II and after having spent three years in Byzantium they returned with jewels and gold coins with the effigy of the emperor⁴⁷. Chilperic has proudly shown Gregory the diplomatic gifts, because he has seen in them a source of prestige for himself, but also for the kingdom of the Franks⁴⁸. In reality, the intention that the emperor had when he was sending such precious objects was to offer a “powerful gift” which put the recipient in debt and overwhelm him, expressing the Byzantine superiority⁴⁹. Whatever the interpretation that this episode may be given, it seems clear that the empire managed, through diplomacy, to be still recognized as a source of legitimacy by barbarian sovereigns.

The narrative sources confirm the use of translators, interpreters, mostly when it comes to relations with the Persians or oriental barbarians. Procopius details how the Persian king Chosroes uses the interpreter Paulus, a native of Byzantine

⁴² Martindale, Jones; Morris, 1992.

⁴³ Procopius, *BP*, II, 8.

⁴⁴ Levy-Rubin, 2011, 14-15.

⁴⁵ Cutler, 2008, 79-101.

⁴⁶ Menander, 6. 1.

⁴⁷ Gregory of Tours, VI, 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Curta, 2006, 698.

territories, to extort besieged Byzantine cities⁵⁰. Menander Protector mentions the use of interpreters during the negotiations between Byzantines and Persians or between Byzantines and Avars or Turks⁵¹.

The professional character acquired by the diplomatic relations between Byzantines and Persians is well documented by the description of the negotiations held by Petrus Patricius and Yesdegusnaph for concluding the “50 years peace” in 562. The story is based on the report written after the Petrus Patricius and the essential elements of the negotiations appear to be authentic. Menander Protector shows how both delegations meet at Dara, on the frontier. The Byzantines were led by Petrus Patricius, *magister officiorum*, and the Persians by Yesdegusnaph, who held the „rank of Zikh, which is the highest honour amongst the Persians, and he served as his king's chamberlain”⁵². The chief negociators were of very high rank, which underlines the importance of the issues that were discussed. The differences between the two sides were that the Persians wanted a lasting peace and a large sum of money to be paid immediately by Justinian, the Byzantines wanted a shorter term truce in order to be able to regroup and nothing to pay. Finally, they reach a compromise. The procedure of signing the treaty is carefully described by Menander, who reproduces a fragment of the report written by Petrus Patricius.

“The fifty year treaty was written out in Persian and Greek, and the Greek copy was translated into Persian and the Persian into Greek. For the Romans, the documents were validated by Peter the master of the offices, Eusebius and others, for the Persians by the Zikh Yesdegusnaph, the Surenas and others. When the agreements had been written on both sides, they were placed side-by-side to ensure that the language corresponded”⁵³.

The long lasting relationship between the two parties had led to the development of elaborated concepts and procedures⁵⁴. The establishment of treaties demanded skills and

⁵⁰ Procopius, *BP*, II, 8.

⁵¹ Menander, 6. 1.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 6. 1,3. About the career of Yesdegusnaph also see Rezakhani, 2008.

⁵³ Menander, 6. 1.

⁵⁴ Gillet, 2003, 7.

expertise, consisting in writing and translating, comparing the translation by both sides, formal signing, making copies, sealing of the original documents by the envoys, exchanging the originals and copies to be used for reference⁵⁵.

Also, the long familiarity between the two camps may even lead to the inclusion of certain very particular clauses in the treaties, as Agathias, who continues the work of Procopius, tells us about the one negotiated in 532 by the Persian delegation⁵⁶. They obtain for the Platonic philosopher refugees in Persia, because of the persecutions against pagans and of Justinian's closure of the philosophical school in Athens, the right to return to the Byzantine Empire, being granted freedom to practice their religion⁵⁷.

All that information confirms that Byzantium and Persia “respected each other as established empires and so evolved more regular diplomatic procedures to conduct international relations between political equals⁵⁸.”

It was said above that the reports about the barbarian embassies can offer some information of ethnographic nature or, more exactly, stereotypes regarding barbarian traits.

Menander presents quite often the vain pride, which was considered a barbarian character. Kandikh, the leader of the Avar mission from Lazica tells Justinian that their people is the most powerful in the world and invincible, but they had needed the help of other barbarians, the Alans, to be introduced to the Byzantines⁵⁹. They used for their benefit the law of hospitality, respected by most of the Barbarians, which put them under Alan protection⁶⁰. In Menander work, the Avars are shown “now pleading, now threatening”, as proof of their inconstancy, another barbarian trait⁶¹.

But there are situations when presenting a barbarian embassy, the historians record a real ethnographic information, as

⁵⁵ Levy-Rubin, 2011, 15.

⁵⁶ Agathias, 1975, 2.30.3-4.

⁵⁷ Watts, 2005, 286.

⁵⁸ Souza and France, 2008, 2.

⁵⁹ Menander, 5.1.

⁶⁰ Luttwak, 2009, 103.

⁶¹ Menander, 8, 35. For the stereotypes regarding the Barbarians in the Roman world, see Dauge, 1981, *passim*.

in the case of Menander describing the Turks. Sent by Sizabul⁶², the Turkish envoys come to Constantinople under the protection of Maniakh, a leader of the Sogdians from Central Asia, to negotiate economic and politic relations. After offering “a valuable gift of raw silk”, they “asked the Emperor for peace and an offensive and defensive alliance” and they took an oath. Interesting is their manner of swearing, because they “raised their hands on high and swore upon their greatest oath that they were saying these things with honest intent. In addition, they called down curses upon themselves, even upon Sizabul and upon their whole race, if their claims were false and could not be fulfilled”⁶³. This description could be accurate, we even have other older sources which present the barbarians, who lack the custom of written treaties, using the oaths as a traditional way to ensure the respect of an agreement⁶⁴. The possibility that here we have an information about an actual practice and not a stereotype about a barbarian custom is suggested by another episode from Menander’s work, which proves that the historian uses first-hand information about the peoples who enter in diplomatic contacts with the Byzantines. After establishing the relations with the Turks, a byzantine envoy, Zemarchos, is sent to them, reaches Altai region and is the witness of a shamanic ceremony.

“They set fire to branches of the frankincense tree, chanted some barbarous words in their Scythian tongue, making noise with bells and drums, waved above the baggage the frankincense boughs as they were crackling with flames, and, falling into a frenzy and acting like madmen, supposed that they were driving away evil spirits”⁶⁵.

This kind of description can not be found in older texts, so this account has to be authentic⁶⁶.

The analysis of the barbarian embassies and envoys presented in the narrative sources from the 6th century could continue, but we believe that some important aspects have already been highlighted. The relevance and richness of details varies

⁶² It seems that his real name was *Yabghu qagan Ishtemi*; see Luttwak, 2009, 98.

⁶³ Menander, 10.1.

⁶⁴ Levy-Rubin, 2011, 16.

⁶⁵ Menander, 10.3.

⁶⁶ Luttwak, 2009, 99.

widely from author to author, but as a general idea, much more detail is given by Byzantine authors than the Western, Latin ones.

Depending on the context, the recourse to diplomatic means can be judged or condemned and the attitude towards the barbarian envoys varies according to the location of these barbarians on the ladder of civilization. The Western Barbarians and to a certain extent the Persians are considered compatible with the Byzantines, and usually they are shown acting in a diplomatic manner which complies with the Byzantine rules. The security of envoys is observed, according to the so called *ius gentium* (law of nations), even if some of them are sometimes detained as a sort of hostages. Of course, these rules are sometimes broken, sometimes even by the Persians, who are equal partners of the Byzantines but can not be always trusted.

The Eastern Barbarians behave insolently, asking with boldness subsidies, but some of them could become friends of the Byzantines, even if usually they are treated with a lack of confidence.

Talking about an objective reality, the depiction of barbarian embassies tells us more about stereotypes and imaginary and more about the Byzantines than about the Barbarians.

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