

# Greek Sources of the Avar History of the Ninth Century<sup>1</sup>



In this work, the well-known Byzantinologist of the University of Szeged has undertaken a supplementary task. The book described below is unique in that it studies intensively an epoch of the history of the Carpathian Basin, that has not been adequately given its place in the edition of sources until now. It was after the publication of several proceedings of conferences and editions that a work entitled *Az avar történelem forrásai (557-től 806-ig) – Die Quellen der Awarengeschichte (von 557 bis 806)* was published in full by Samu Szádeczky-Kardoss and his colleagues (Cs. Farkas, M. Borsos, É. Csillik, F. Makk, T. Olajos) in 1998. The book presents in thematic order the Hungarian translation of the original sources, written in Greek, along with summaries written in German and commentaries, all referring to the successive events of Avar History. The other work of great importance, elaborates on those sources that refer to the period lasting from the first mention of the Hungarians by Byzantine authors (902) till the end of the Árpád dynasty (1301).<sup>2</sup> The book, in a bilingual Greek and Hungarian edition, supplemented by a Greek and a Hungarian index, contains those Byzantine sources that provide information on the Hungarians. What the book, described below, basically does, is to link the chronological limits of the two previous works. Before dealing with the book written by Terézia Olajos, I find it essential to allude to another important work, which gives more information on the subject. The book is entitled *Byzantinoturcica*, written by Gyula Moravcsik, in which the author presents us with Byzantine original sources along with specialized literature referring to the Turks.<sup>3</sup>

Terézia Olajos, author of the book introduced below, is a professor in the Department of Auxiliary Disciplines of the Historical Institute at the University of Szeged. Her major fields of research are Roman Literature in the late period of

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<sup>1</sup> Teréz Olajos, *A 9. századi avar történelem görög nyelvű forrásai*. [The Greek Sources for the Avar History of the Ninth Century] Szegedi Középkortörténeti Könyvtár 16, Szeged 2001. pp 207.

<sup>2</sup> Gy. Moravcsik, *Az Árpád-kori magyar történet bizánci forrásai – Fontes Byzantini historiae Hungaricae aevo ducum et regum ex stirpe Árpád descenduntium*. Budapest 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Gy. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*. 2 vols. Berlin 1958.

the Empire, early Byzantine literature and history, the relations between Byzantium and the Steppe population in the sixth–ninth centuries and Hungarian pre-history. She is a member of the Committee of Classical Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Moreover, she is the editor of a Szeged series entitled *Opuscula Byzantina* and member of the editorial staff of the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*. She is also the author of several books, among which one deserves particular attention, entitled *Les sources de Théophylacte Simocatta historien*.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, she has written nearly 150 articles and essays among which many were published in foreign languages in important specialised periodicals. In honour of the completion of Professor Terézia Olajos sixtieth year, a volume of essays and studies appeared which contains her complete lifes' work.<sup>5</sup>

In the book discussed here, Terézia Olajos – as mentioned before – meets a long felt need in many respect. On the one hand, she links the epochs dealt with in Gyula Moravcsik and Samu Szádeczky-Kardoss's source edition, and on the other, she presents (both in Greek and Hungarian) those sources referring to the history of the Avars which had been known before only from the *Byzantinoturcica*'s descriptions. As mentioned by the author, she deals with two such sources that had not been treated before by Hungarian scholars of the Avar period (p. 10.). One of these is the *Chronicle of Petrus Alexandrinus*, of which *editio princeps* came to light from the pen of Z. G. Samodurova after the publication of the *Byzantinoturcica*. The other work entitled *Additio patriarchicorum thronorum* – according to Terézia Olajos – escaped Gyula Moravcsik's attention.

Sources, concerning Avar History in the ninth century, are presented in a thematic order. On every occasion, when Terézia Olajos expounds on a source, she also enlarges upon its authors as well as its original sources, manuscripts and editions but she also includes emerging problematic opinions and comments. These are followed by selected passages in Greek, then in Hungarian, and finally commentaries in Hungarian, which constitute a great help in orienting the reader within the rich specialized literature.

The first thematic part of the book is the chapter entitled *Krum, the Bulgarian Khan and the Avars*. The first source included is the *Lexicon Souda* of which title – according to a debate of the 1930s – as opposed to previous views, does not come from a man called Suidas, as the word is derived from the Greek Σούδα ('fence, moat, palisade'), which refers to a well-constructed work metaphorically (pp. 13–14.). From the Greek text editions, in fact only those, put forward by Teubner, collected by A. Adler, are considered to be up-to-date enough (pp. 14–15). From among the sources of the *Souda* it is worth mentioning – already highlighted by Adler – the *Excerpta historica iussu imperatoris Constantini Porphyrogeniti confecta* written by an obscure Byzantine author (p. 21).

As regards its content, the source tells about the Bulgarians who completely eliminated the Avars and that the Avars took such delight in the costumes of the

<sup>4</sup> *Byzantina Neerlandica* 10. Leiden–New York–Kobenhavn–Köln 1988.

<sup>5</sup> *Kultúrák találkozásáa*. [Meeting of Cultures] ed. Ferenc Makk, Szeged 2002.

Bulgarians, that, they interchanged their own clothes with the Bulgarians. It also mentions that when Krum (c. 802–814) asked the Avars what they considered to be the main reason for the elimination of their whole nation and their ruler, that the Avars answered – in most cases – the making of repeated accusations against each other, straying from the true path and that thieves became the allies of the judges. Among other major problems, the spread of alcoholism, corruption and trading led to serious trouble for the Avars. Soon after the reply of the Avars, Krum enacted stringent laws, including a decree that all vineyards must be uprooted (pp. 25–28). Owing to this latter passage, the authenticity of the source is often questioned. On the one hand, the uncertainty is due to the fact that the source tells about those soldiers of Nicephorus (802–811), who found a plentiful supply of wine at the residence of Krum, but on the other hand, a total abstinence from wine is a recurring theme with several authors (Strabo, Caesar, Philostratus, Manuel II Palaiologos). However, in the *Souda*, from the letter of Pope Nicholas I (858–867) written to the Bulgarians (*Responsa Nicolai I papae ad consulta Bulgarorum*) laws can be read, which show great similarity to those enacted by Krum. The former source deals with another issue, namely, that the Bulgarians asked the Pope's opinion on the wearing of trousers (*femoralia*), which complements the passage on the dressing habits of the *Souda*. Moreover, in contemporary Frankish sources, among the causes that made the Avars fall, we find very similar ones to those that were given to Krum by prisoners of war, and as such, we can accept the information of the *Souda* as authentic. However, it followed the literary style of its own age, richly decorated with *topoi* (pp. 21–25.).

The most controversial point of the chapters of the *Souda*, referring to the Avars, is the part, in which we are informed about, that the Bulgarian eliminated the Avars completely. However, it seems to be contradiction with historical facts, since nowadays, due to archaeological, linguistic, anthropological and historical research, the general conclusion seems to be, that the Avars survived the Hungarian Conquest (895). This assumption also seems to be supported by the fact, that, according to the *Scriptor incertus B*, when Krum entered upon a campaign against Byzantium, he had a great number of soldiers. Béla Miklós Szőke takes the view that the passage on the complete fall of the Avars is not a real event, but serves only as a proverb or an adage, and that this is the reason for its repetition in the source. Terézia Olajos, after examining the *Souda*, on the basis of philological arguments, considers this assumption impossible. In her opinion, the repetition of certain parts occurs frequently, without being their proverbs (p. 29.), and it is more acceptable to see the complete elimination as denoting a military victory instead of a complete elimination of the whole population (pp. 30–33). She considers unwarrantable the assumptions of Péter Váczy, who supports the idea that, this passage of the *Souda* linked with certain parts of the *Tenth letter of patriarch Nikolaos Mystikos* as well as with excerpts of similar content of the *Povest' vremennykh let*. However, she gives full credit to Péter Váczy, for realising that the Bulgarian campaign, taking place after Krum succeeded to the throne (802–803), played an important role in Frankish military successes. Váczy draws attention to

the fact that, in 803, the region between the Danube and Tisza rivers did not come under the rule of the Bulgarians, but under the Franks. This assumption is supported by Einhard's information on Charlemagne's (768–814) conquering of Dacia on the other side of the Danube. Also in those areas of the Great Hungarian Plain that were previously occupied by Avars, Slavs took up residence, who were called *Abodriti Praedenecenti*. At the time of the Emperor Louis I the Pious (814–840), they occupied Dacia (the adjoining area of the Danube) and up to 824, they belonged to the Frankish protectorate. Obviously, the term Dacia did not denote the Province established by Traianus, but in compliance with early medieval concepts, it referred to most parts of the region between the Danube and Tisza rivers as well (pp. 33–37.). According to Frankish annals, Charlemagne probably conquered these territories in 803. When writing notes of explanation to the *Souda*, it is important to draw attention to one source, entitled Notker Balbulus, which on the authority of Einhard, gives information about when Charlemagne got the Avars into his power after eight years had passed. Those eight years must be reckoned from the recording of 791 of the annals, used by Einhard, but in this case we do not get the date of the end of the Frankish–Avar war. In Terézia Olajos's opinion, the inaccurate data is due to the early transcriber's mistake, who, instead of number XIII read number VIII, and changed the latter into *octavo*. From 791 till 803, till the actual conclusion of the war, exactly thirteen years passed (pp. 39–43.).

The next source, dealing with Krum and the Avars is entitled *Scriptor incertus A*. This source have subsisted in a unique codex of the thirteenth century, which can be found only in the Library of the Vatican. The relevant edition of the source was created by Ivan Dujčev. It was established by H. Grégoire, that, on the basis of stylistic and semantic relations, the *Scriptor incertus A* and *B* are both extracts of the same work. According to Terézia Olajos, from aspect of genre, it cannot be decided whether the work is a *chronica* or a *historia*. She also questions, whether the original source is contemporaneous or it was composed only after the Avars had adopted Christianity (middle of the 860s). On the whole, we can consider the source as authentic, contemporaneous, or almost contemporaneous (pp. 44–49). According to the source, the Bulgarians kept watch on the Byzantines from the mountains, took Avars into their service, provided women with arms, and on 23 July 811 (26 July in reality), by Saturday morning, broke in upon the Byzantines (pp. 49–50.). The final result of the military expedition is quite well known: the complete annihilation of the Byzantine army and the death of Nicephorus. According to an Old Slavic hagiographic text (*prolog*), under the name Ęgre~Vęgre~Ugre, 'soldiers of the people' also battled on the side of the Bulgarians. For Péter Király, the name refers to those Hungarians, who lived in the region north of the Lower Danube at that time. As far as Imre Boba is concerned, the expression denotes the Onogurs. Terézia Olajos shares the view of Dujčev and Samu Szádeczky-Kardoss. As such, she finds it more probable, that an anonymous translator of Slavic origin from a later age, simply replaced the Avars – who had already fallen into oblivion by that time – with the Hungarians, whom he had

known well and who lived on the territory, previously occupied by the Avars. It is worth mentioning, that in about 670–680, a significant number of Onog(und)ur Bulgarian population immigrated into the Carpathian Basin, under the leadership of Kuber's fourth son. At the same time, this population constituted a great proportion of the late Avars (pp. 54–57.).

Another problematic issue while analysing the *Scriptor incertus A*, that, according to the information of the *Souda*, Krum subjugated the Avars in 803, but, according to the records of the *Scriptor incertus B*, in 814 the Avars battled as the dependants of the Bulgarian Prince. Consequently, it is essential to find an explanation for the question, for what reason did Krum take the Avars into his service in 811. In Terézia Olajos's opinion, this Avar population is not identical with those living in the south part of the Great Hungarian Plain, as they were Krum's subjects. Similarly, these people can hardly be identified with those living in the ex-Province of Pannonia under Frankish authority (right of the Danube). Terézia Olajos concludes, that it means those Avars, who lived on the northern part of the Great Hungarian Plain and were independent of Bulgaria. In the *Chronicle of Regino*, produced in about 900, this region is described, as the wastelands of the Avars (*Avarum solitudines*), from where the border of Bulgaria can easily be reached (*Vulgarum fines*) (pp. 57–61.).

The next source included in the book, is the *Scriptor incertus B*, – mentioned several times before – which survived in a manuscript of the eleventh century, preserved in Paris, and its relevant edition can be found in the Vol. 26. of the Corpus of Bonn. This source gives information on Krum's campaign against the Byzantine Emperor Leo V (813–820), and his large army, including the Avars (pp. 64–65.). The campaign was brought to an end because of Krum's sudden death (13 April 814) and it was fraudulently made appear by Leo V as if Krum's death was caused by his arrow. However, after Krum's death the danger of an offensive by the Bulgarians still existed, which is evident from the fact that at the beginning of August 814, the Byzantines asked for help from the Frankish Emperor Louis I, the Pious, against the Bulgarians and other barbarians, whom perhaps might be identified with the Avars, living on the Upper-Tisza region and already mentioned by Regino (pp. 65–66.).

In the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Symeon*, which was attributed mistakenly to Magister Symeon for a long time, except for a difference in one letter only, the same passage can be found exactly as in the *Scriptor incertus B*. The text has survived only in a single codex of Paris and today we examine it only on the basis of an obsolete edition of the Corpus of Bonn. However, A. Markopoulos has been creating a new critical edition of the *Chronicle* for the *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, Series Berolinensis* (pp. 67–69.).

The next large thematic block of the book contains sources, which deal with those christianised Avars who fell under the jurisdiction of the Pope in Rome. The first of these is the *Notitia episcopatum no. 5.*, which shows that the Pope's authority extended over the Avars. The best edition among the preserved six texts is the Berlin one, published by Gustav Parthey in 1866, which was re-pub-

lished in 1967. In the second half of the eight century, the Pope excepted only the Protectorate of the Carolingian rulers. In this way, among the people living under Frankish authority, the Avars, who once lived on the territory of the ex-Province of Pannonia, got under the inspectorship of the Pope. The *Annales regni Francorum a. 795, 796.* gives information on what happened in 796 when the Avar leader, who possessed the status of the *tudun*, together with his dependants, went to Charlemagne and adopted Christianity. According to the *Conventus episcoporum ad ripam Danubii*, when in 796, viceroy Pippin was on the bank of the Danube with his army, waiting to cross the river and conquer the residence of the Avars' Chief Prince, then an episcopal council, under the chairmanship of the Aquileian Patriarch Paulinus, arrived at a decision on the methods of christening the Avars. According to the information of the *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum 6. caput*, Pippin annexed the territory, bounded by the Rivers Raba-Danube-Drava, to the Archbishopric of Salzburg in 796, which is also verified by the fact, that Alcuin, in his letters, written in 798-799 to Arno, Archbishop of Salzburg, mentions those Avars who were under the Archbishop's authority. According to the *Annales Mettenses priores (a. 805)* and the *Annales regni Francorum (a. 805)*, the reason the Avar *capcanus* Theodorus gained the benevolence of Charlemagne and obtained a new residence for his people (*inter Sabariam et Carnuntum*) who were pressed closely by Slavs, was due to his adoption of Christianity. The *Annales Iuvavenses maiores (a. 805)* and the *Annales Sancti Emmerami Ratisponenses maiores (a. 805)* give information on the baptism of the Avar Khagan, Abraham, on 21 September, in the River Fischa. In this context, it is essential to mention a drinking cup, which was found nearby the River Raba bearing the inscription *Cunpald fecit*. In István Bóna's opinion, the drinking cup served as grave-furniture and was specially made for the Prelate. In the Biography of Constantine-Cyrrill, written in Slav in about 867-868, the Avars, among other people, are described as a nation who read texts in their own language and give glory to God. However, it is not clear, whether Constantine meant the Slovenized Avars who were living on the Peloponnesus or a Caucasian ethnic group, or perhaps the Pannonian avars. Terézia Olajos's opinion is that the source probably denotes the Avars living in the Caucasus, although, in the light of the increasing number of runic relics, she does not exclude the possibility that Constantine's information may refer to the Avars, living in the Carpathian Basin (pp. 73-82.).

A manuscript, from Pathmos, comprises the inconsistently redrafted version of the *Notitia episcopatum (rec. Parthey) no. 5.* which occur under the name of *Additio patriarchicorum thronorum* (pp. 83-84).

The source entitled *Notitia patriarchatum p. 269-270. rec. Parthey*, compiled by Doxopatres Nikolaos in the twelfth century, also has a connection with the text tradition of the *Notitia episcopatum*. The work does not have an up-to-date edition, however, Terézia Olajos mentions, that one is being prepared by the Istituto Siciliano of Palermo, on the basis of V. Laurent's posthumous critical work (pp. 85-87.).

The third major subject of the book is the Avars of the ninth century, analysed in the light of a biblical interpretation and the Alexander Romance. From among the sources appearing in this chapter, there is one, which rises above the others. This is the *Chronica of Petrus Alexandrinus*, which was published in the volume of 1961 of the *Vizantijskij Vremennik* by Z. G. Samodurova, on the sole basis of the manuscript of Moscow. The world Chronicle originates the Avars, who are Slavs too, from Shem. Among its sources appears a chronicle, written by the antipope, Hippolytos, in 234/235, in which the Sarmatian Jazigs are mentioned at the place where Alexandrinus Petrus describes the Avars. Consequently, the author of the source had accurate knowledge of the circumstances of the ninth century, namely, that Avars were living on the Great Hungarian Plain by that time and had become more and more Slavonized (pp. 91–96.).

The *Divisio populorum et linguarum*, has survived in two codices, one preserved in Vienna, the other in the Vatican and gives a similar account of the Avars. The source of the work is supposed to be the Chronicle of Hippolytos, written in 234/235, however, the Avars are identified with the *Maramantes* incorrectly here. The name *Maramantes* denotes the *Garamantes*, who were living on the border of the Sahara and whom are frequently mentioned in ancient literature, from Herodotus up to Ptolemy. At the time of Hippolytos, they were identified only from these literary traditions and it is not at all probable that they ever existed. Their identification with the Avars is due to a misinterpretation (pp. 97–100.). The Avars had been inserted fraudulently into the Alexander Romance, in which they appear among the people whom Alexander the Great conquered in the ninth–tenth centuries and which was preserved under the name of Kallisthenes, but often mentioned as Pseudo-Kallisthenes. The text is known from H. Meusel's edition of Leipzig (pp. 101–103.).

The fourth principal theme of the book is concerned with those Avars who were living in Dalmatia till the second half of the tenth century. The source for this is the *De administrando imperio* by Constantinus Porphyrogenitus. The Greek text was translated into English and they were published together in Vol. I. of the *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* by Gyula Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins. The work was compiled in about 948–952 and relates that the Avars were defeated by the Croats, however, some of the Avars continued to live in Croatia, and their Avar origin is clearly recognisable. There are two sources for information on surviving Avars. The first is the one written by Regino – already mentioned before – in which we can read about pagan Avars, living in the northern part of the Great Hungarian Plain, at the end of the ninth century. The other is the *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* from 871, which provides information about the baptized Pannonian Avars. In addition to these sources, the existence of a surviving Avar population is confirmed by place names such as Obrov, Obrovo, Obrovac, Obre, Obri, referring to those Avars living in the region between Sirmium (Srem) and Zara (Zadar). Furthermore, the place called Haimburg in Carinthia, whose German name is often associated with the Hun ethnic name – is

also linked with the Avars – and the settlement's name is Vobre in Slovenian (pp. 107–117.).

Information on the Avars living outside the Middle-Danube Region in the ninth century can be found in the appendix of the book. The information of the *Vita Sancti Pancratii auctore qui dicitur Euagrius* gives a flashback to the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century. The source, which is entirely unpublished and survived in several text tradition, gives an account of how Pankratios met pagan Avars living in Greek captivity, in the vicinity of Dyrracchion (Durazzo, Durës) and Athens, who did not speak the Hellenic language and made sacrifices to fire, water and their swords. Theophylaktos, Archbishop of Ohrid (1088/89–1126) refers to the same people in his work, which deals with those fifteen martyrs of Tiberiopolis, who suffered martyrdom at the time of Apostata Iulianus (361–363). Similarly, he identifies those barbarians who destroyed Tiberiopolis (Strumica) with the Avars who arrived from the South. This Avar population might be one of those peoples who spoke Slavic, lived in the Balkans in the ninth century and who, on the basis of a reference to the sword cult, if not their language but had definitely preserved a Scythian–Hunnish tradition (pp. 121–128.).

There are three other sources which provide information on those Avars who lived in the Peloponnesus: the *Chronicon Monembasiae*, the *Scholion Arethae*, and the *Epistola synodalis Nicolai III. Grammatici patriarchae*. According to the evidence of these three sources, the Peloponnesus emerged from the supremacy of Byzantium between 587–588 and 805–806, because of an Avar campaign. It was Nicephorus I, who put an end to the gradual reoccupation of the region in 805/806, when he reconquered the city of Patras and resettled in their former place the descendants of those who escaped to the South of Italy. The subdued Avars of that time probably did not have any link with the Avar Khaganate, since it was cut off by a vast zone of independent Bulgarian, Croatian and Serbian settlers (pp. 129–152.).

The last source of the book is the *De septem climatibus in codice Graeco Parisino 854*. In this thirteenth-century manuscript we can read about a text, composed in the ninth century, which was published by E. Honigmann in Heidelberg in 1929. According to the text, in the sixth Zone lay the Caspian Gates, residence of the Armenians and in the region of the *Pontus Euxinus* we find the land of the Avars. Because the Middle-Danube region is situated in the seventh Zone, the information cannot refer to those Avars who were living in the Carpathian Basin. As far as Terézia Olajos is concerned, the source probably deals with those Caucasian Avars, whom we only know from Oriental original sources (pp. 153–157.).

The final chapter of the book is basically an evaluative section, which consists of a few pages only with a conclusion, based on the sources. This is followed by a rich bibliography. The picture presented by the different sources, is of Avar remnants living under Frankish authority in the ex-Province of Pannonia in 870–871, in the northern part of the Great Hungarian Plain in c. 889, and in Dalmatia in c. 950. These data can be well complemented by those archaeological results, that

prove that much of the late Avar population lived to see the Hungarian Conquest, presumably assimilated gradually into the surrounding Slavs, and from 895 into the Hungarians.

The book contains twenty selected sources, arranged into five themes, which cover the complete Greek text tradition dealing with the Avars of the ninth century. The exhaustive commentaries, on the individual sources, provides information not only on the specialised literature of problematic issues, but also, on the non-Greek sources linked with the subject and in this way they are able to provide a full picture on the history of the age. On this basis, we can say, that the book is an indispensable tool for those historians, archaeologists and linguists whose field of research is not only the Carpathian Basin, but also the contemporaneous Balkan-Peninsula, Byzantium, the Frankish Empire and the Steppe Region.

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