

Byzantium in Asia – *Pur(u)m* and *Fulin*

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On the heydays of the wars against the Arab-Muslim conquerors Byzantium had a special role. It was not only a power what (in spite of heavy losses) could successfully resist the new lords of Eurasia, but rebuffing them in 718 it became also a symbol of this resistance. In our short article we are going to investigate how all these events led to this historical and even mythological role.

On the Orkhon Inscriptions one can read the famous phrase:

(I. E 4 = II. E 5) *yoyčī siyitči öñrā kūn toγsiqda bökli čöl(l)üg el tabγaç tüpüt apar purum qırqız üč qurıqan otuz tatar qıtañ tatabi bunča bodun kälipän siytamiš yoylamiš*

The translation of this famous passage is also well-known:

“As mourners and lamenters there came from the east, from where the Sun rises, the representatives of the people of the Bükli plain, the Chinese, the Tibetan, the Avar, the Byzantium, the Kirghiz, the Üč Qurıqan, the Otuz Tatar, the Qıtañ and the Tatabi This many people came and mourned and lamented.”¹

Hirth argued that both the names Ta-ch'in (大秦) and Fu-lin (拂菻) must stand only for Syria and the Nestorians while the expression of Ta Fu-lin (大拂菻 'Greater Fu-lin') designated the Roman Empire,² Hirth's ideas were disputed by Chavannes,³ and later, based on Sung sources, Enoki Kazuo.⁴ However Bielenstein still argues, following Hirth's ideas, that the Fu-lin of the Chinese must stand not for the Byzantine Empire but only for Syria and its king who sent an embassy to the Chinese Emperor

1 Tekin, T.: *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic*. The Hague 1968, 232, 264.

2 Hirth, F.: *China and the Roman Orient. Researches into their Ancient and Mediaeval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records*. Leipzig-München-Shanghai-Hongkong 1885, 206-217; Hirth, F.: The Ta-ts'in Question. *The Chinese Recorder*, (November 1885), 1-8; Hirth, F.: The Mystery of Fu-lin. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* XXX (1909), 1-31, XXXIII (1913), 193-208;

3 Chavannes, Éd: Notes additionnelles sur les Tou-kiue Turcs) occidentaux, *T'oung Pao* (NS) V (1904), 37 (note 3).

4 Enoki, K.: Some Remarks on the Country of Ta-ch'in as Known to the Chinese under the Sung. *Asia Major*, NS, IV (1954), 1-19.

in 643 must be the Nestorian (!) Patriarch of Antioch.⁵ That can be hardly the case. At first, there were no Nestorian Patriarchs in Antioch. The followers of this lore emigrated from Edessa to Persia in 497 and became the officially recognized Christian denomination of that empire, launching from there missions into Central Asia, China, and India.⁶ Had there been any Nestorian Patriarchs in Antioch, they definitely could not manage such a diplomatic affair during the turbulent years of the Arabic conquest of the Middle East. Such would be the case with the Monophysite Patriarchate,⁷ but it had no connections with China and Inner Asia and also with the Orthodox/Melchite one. One can rather suppose that the Chinese source referred to by Bielenstein (*T'ang-hui-yao* 99, 12a-12b) erroneously narrates not only the date (661–663) but also in the extent of the Arabic conquest, constating that the whole country of Fu-lin was taken by the Arabs. Describing the *T'ieh-lê* tribes, the *Sui-shu* mentions some tribes of them living to the north to *Fu-lin* (but to the east to the Caspian Sea),⁸ which also would be impossible if this term stood for Syria. The description of *Fu-lin* in the *Hsin T'ang-shu*, according to which *Fu-lin* is to the south of the *Ko-sa* tribe of the *T'u-chüeh* (!) and to the north-west of Persia (*Po-sse*) makes also impossible the identification of Fu-lin (and also Ta-ch'in as its forerunner) with Syria.⁹

On the other hand, it seems to be impossible that any Nestorian (or other) Patriarch could be mentioned on the Orkhon Inscriptions (I, E 1), where *purum* were one of the rulers who send envoys to the funerals of the first (?) rulers of the Turks. The title 'king' *wang* (王) applied in our Chinese sources to the ruler of *Fu-lin* may well correspond to Greek βασιλεύς the official title of the Byzantine emperors since 629.¹⁰

Our second question is why the presence of the Romans (Byzantines) was so important for the Turks. The first half of the answer simply lays on our hand: (Eastern) Rome was an old ally of the Turks, and the memory of this alliance could well remain alive for centuries. On the other hand, Rome was not only a real, but even a symbolic power.

From a Chinese Buddhist text preserving the knowledge of the Kushan Empire we can learn that the inhabited world had 72 kingdoms and four empires: China, Rome,

5 Bielenstein, H.: *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World, 589–1276*. (Handbuch der Orientalistik/Handbook of Oriental Studies IV/18, Leiden–Boston 2005), 366.

6 On this topic see: Vine, A.: *The Nestorian Churches. A Concise History of Nestorian Christianity in Asia From the Persian Schism to the Modern Assyrians*. London 1937, 37–52.

7 Honigmann: *Évêques et évêchés...*, 19–31,

8 *Sui-shu* 84, *lieh-chuan* 49, Shanghai, Commercial Press ed. 18a–18b; LMT 127–128.

9 Ögel, B.: Göktürk yazıtlarının «Apuřım»ları ve «Fu-lin» problemi. *Türk Tarih Kurumu, Belleten* IX (1945), 72

10 Chrysos, E. K.: The Official Title βασιλεύς in Early Byzantine International Relations. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* XXXII (1978), 29–75. For the Chinese data on the title wang (王) cf.: Hucker, Ch. O.: *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*. Taiwan Edition, Taipei 1988, 562; on the traditional Chinese vision on the Emperor as an universal ruler and harmony-maker of the inhabited world, cf.: Алимов, И.А.—Ермаков, М.Е.—Мартынов, А.С.: *Срединное государство. Введение традиционную культуру Китая*. Москва 1988, 53–58.

India and that of the Kushans (*yüeh-chih*).¹¹ Later, in our early Muslim Iranian sources, in the *Farsnāma* we can see a similar situation: “It was one of the rites of the court of Anūšīrvān that he let set up a golden chair on the right side of this throne, and on the left side and on the back of it he let set up similar golden chairs. And one of these places was for the ruler of China (*malik-i Šīn*), and the other place was for the ruler of Rome (*malik-i Rūm*), the third place was for the ruler of the Khazars (*malik-i Ḥazar*). Should they happen to come to his court, they would sit onto these chairs. He set up these three chairs in every year and never removed them. And no one dared to seat onto them except of these three persons.”¹²

So, what we can see here is the ritualized world order of the Silk Road before the Islam. We also know it very well, that this old order had fought fiercely against the Arabic intruders until 751. We also have information that these powers had mutual contacts between each other. When Yazdagird III, the last Sassanian Emperor finally was killed at Marv, not only the dynasty fled to China, but the T’ang also organized a province “Persia” (*Po-szu*) in Sistan (659). Our Chinese sources mention Byzantine envoys in China in 643, 667, 701, and 719.¹³ These embassies must cross the territories inhabited by the Western Turks, then vassals of China.

The heyday of these fights against the Arabs was 718 when the Byzantine navy, using the famous Greek fire, finally pushed back the Muslims from Constantinople. Although the Byzantines became use the new title *basileus*, the old title of the Eastern Roman Emperors, *Qaysar Rum* remained in use in the Orient. Stein therefore supposed that the name of Gesar reflects not Julius Caesar, as it was earlier usually held, but Leon III (the Isaurian, 711–741).

Professor Sagaster wrote in a short and sharp paper, that for the Muslim Tibetan inhabitants of Baltistan *Kasar* is a form of *Dajjal* (the Muslim Antichrist).¹⁴ The Balti region was the frontline in the fight of the Muslim intruders.

So, we may assume, that the inhabitants of this region once Buddhist later Muslims just preserved the memory of these fights renarrating the events according to their new religion.

Here we can answer the second half of our question. As the Orkhon Inscriptions narrate the history of the A-shih-na dynasty as the restorers of the traditional Inner Asian world order, they also should refer to their earlier connections with the heroes who (even temporarily) restored the Old World – the Romans.

11 Pelliot, P.: La théorie des quatre Fils du Ciel. *T’oung Pao*, 2nd series, XXII (1923), 98.

12 Ibn Al-Balḥī: *Fārsnāma*. Eds. Le Strange, G.- Nicholson, R. A., London 1921, 97.

13 Lévi, S.– Chavannes, Éd: L’Itineraire d’Ou-K’ong (751–790), traduit et annoté, *Journal Asiatique* sept–oct 1895, 343–344.; Hirth, F.: The Mystery of Fu-lin. *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 7.

14 Sagaster, K.: Kesar, der islamische Antichrist. In: Sagaster, K.–Weiers, M. (Hrsg): *Documenta Barbarorum. Festschrift für Walter Heissig zum 70. Geburtstag*. Veröffentlichungen der Societas Uralo-Altaica Bd. 18. Wiesbaden 1983, 341–349.