

# Is Tearing the Tent Down the Symbolic Expression of the Death Penalty? – The Traces of an Avar Custom in the Work of Theophylact Simocatta

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The tent or the yurt played an important role in the lives of the nomadic peoples. The mobile homes of these peoples have already been researched in many aspects. Recently, Peter Alford Andrews explored this topic in more detail in his two-volume work (Andrews 1999). The author chronologically deals with the written sources and visual representations of the tents/yurts of the nomadic people, starting with the Scythians up until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, Andrews also touches upon the symbolic meanings of the tent or its various parts for some peoples. In the case of the Avars, he analyzes one source, Maurice's *Strategicon*, from which one might infer the type and shape of the tent used by these nomadic people. In addition to the source used by Andrews for the Avar tent, another author's work can be included in the investigation. There is a passage in the work of Theophylact Simocatta that tells about the Avars' tent-related habits. According to the Byzantine author, for these nomadic people tearing down the tent symbolizes the death penalty.<sup>1</sup> In this study, I analyze this detail of Theophylact Simocatta's work.

Theophylact Simocatta, the author of the source, played an important role in the Byzantine state apparatus.<sup>2</sup> His most important work including eight books is the *Oicumenicé historia* deals with the reign of Emperor Maurice (582–602). The author focuses on two main subjects: Avars and Slavs in the Balkans and the Byzantine war in the East against Persia.<sup>3</sup> Because of his position, he had access to numerous documents and records, and, as a result, his work contains much valuable information about the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup>-century South Russian steppe peoples, including the Avars.

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1 The historical work of Theophylact Simocatta was published in English, German and Hungarian translation. Michael Whitby, Mary Whitby, and Peter Schreiner did not focus on the importance of source's part discussed here (Whitby–Whitby 1986: 28; Schreiner 1985: 51). At the same time, Samu Szádeczky-Kardoss and Terézia Olajos emphasized the significance of the nomadic background of the custom (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 63).

2 For the life and work of Theophylact Simocatta in details, see Moravcsik 1983: 544–545; Olajos 1981: 3–4; Whitby–Whitby 1986: xiii–xiv; Whitby 1988: 28–33.

3 For his work Theophylact Simocatta used mainly historical writings of Ioannes Epiphaneus, but besides, works of Menander Protector, Ailianos, and Diodorus Siculus also served as sources for him (SZÓM 140–141; Olajos 1979: 3–17; Olajos 1988: 14–66, 96–112).

However, it should be noted that due to the intricate style of the Egyptian author, certain details of the work, originating in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, are often difficult to interpret and sometimes dating problems arise with the source (Moravcsik 1983: 544–545; Whitby – Whitby 1986: xvii–xxv, xxvii–xxviii; SZŐM 140).

The piece in question appears in Theophylact Simocatta’s historical work on the Avar’s campaign against the Byzantine Empire in 584. The nomadic people, who moved into the Carpathian Basin in 567, then advanced to Anchialos, and in this year, in the hope of making a peace deal, the Byzantine emperor, under the leadership of Elpidius and Comentiolus, sent an envoy to the Avar Kagan.<sup>4</sup> While Elpidius responded calmly and conciliative to the threatening, lofty words of the Kagan, Comentiolus, a member of the Byzantine Embassy, responded harshly. The speech of the Byzantine envoy, who started as an imperial bodyguard, was an utter diplomatic failure. The Avar Kagan roared in fierce anger, ignored the respect of the ambassadors, and captured Comentiolus, tied him up, put his leg in the stocks, and tore off his tent. Theophylact Simocatta believes that tearing down the tent, in this case, is a local Avar custom, symbolizing the death penalty. Eventually, the hot-headed Byzantine envoy escaped, because the Avar nobles persuaded the Kagan not to pronounce the death sentence on Comentiolus, thus releasing the Byzantine delegation. The peace treaty was finalized lastly in 585, with the assistance of Elpidius which resulted in the Byzantines raising the Avars’ annual money by 20,000 solidi (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 62–63; Olajos 2012: 81; Pohl 2018: 93–94).

It is clear from this part that both the description of the event and Comentiolus’ long, well-elaborated speech to the Avar Kagan, which is absolutely characteristic of the author, are entirely Theophylact Simocatta’s work. The exact meaning of the phrase “tent-tearing” (σκηνοπήγιον διέρρηξε) is not entirely clear. In this section, Theophylact Simocatta uses the term σκηνοπήγιον, which is commonly applied for the tent (Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae I. 6, 2), meaning “tent set-up, tent-pitching” (Györkösy–Kapitánffy–Tegyei 1990: 961; Liddell–Scott–Jones–McKenzie 1958: 1608). In the text edition edited by Carolus de Boor and Peter Wirth, the term is referred to as a “tent” (tentorium) (Boor–Wirth 1972: 425).<sup>5</sup> However, the context in the source clearly explains the correctness of the translation.<sup>6</sup> The verb related to the tent (διαρρήγνυμι) has several meanings; it has been used in the sense of breaking,

4 According to Samu Kardoss and Terézia Olajos this event took place in the autumn of 584 or in the winter of 584–585. (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 62), while in according to Michael and Mary Whitby, and Veselin Beševliev, the legation of Elpidius és Comentiolus to the Avar Khagan was in the autumn of 583 (Beševliev 1950: 257; Whitby–Whitby 1986: 238; Whitby 1988: 142).

5 Hungarian, English and German translations all used the “tent” meaning determined by the Boor text edition: “tent” (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 63; Olajos 2012: 81); „Zelt” (Schreiner 1985: 51) (Whitby–Whitby 1986: 28).

6 Besides this part, the author used the term σκηνοπήγιον in further five places, and in all cases, both in the text edition and in the translations it is applied in the meaning of “tent” (Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae II. 12, 10; III. 2, 1; III. 14, 10; V. 11, 1; VII. 10, 1; Whitby–Whitby 1986: 61, 74, 95, 193; Schreiner 1985: 78, 90, 108, 155, 190; Olajos 2012: 114, 127, 150, 202, 252).

tearing, cracking (Györkösy–Kapitánffy–Tegyei 1990: 248; Liddell–Scott–Jones–McKenzie 1958: 410). The term was interpreted by Terézia Olajos and Samu Szádeczky-Kardoss, the translators of the historical work, as tearing down the tent, but it was mentioned in a footnote that it might have meant tearing-off the tentpole (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 62–63; Olajos 2012: 81).<sup>7</sup> From the interpretations of Michael and Mary Whitby (Whitby 1986: 28),<sup>8</sup> and Peter Schreiner (Schreiner 1985: 51),<sup>9</sup> it seems that they meant tearing up the tent. Thus, the meaning of the words used by Comentiolus in the source passage is unclear, so it cannot be declared that the author was merely thinking of destroying the tent or destroying/damaging any part of the tent (breaking the tent cover or breaking the tent roof column).<sup>10</sup>

Maurice also refers in his military work to the Avar tent, apart from the written sources about the Avars, investigating the custom of tearing down the tent.<sup>11</sup> The Emperor, knowledgeable in military strategy, recommends that the Byzantine army applies the type of tent used by the Avars.<sup>12</sup> According to him, this type of tent used by the nomadic people is pleasing to the eye and practical to use (Maurice I. 2, 10 cf. Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 80–81). Samu Szádeczky-Kardoss, who was the first to study this source in detail, concluded that these could have been yurt-like structures. He interpreted the characteristics of the Avar residence in the source in question, that, unlike the rectangular Byzantine tent, the Avar tent was round in shape, which made it more resistant to strong wind attacks than the square one. He also assumes that it had lattice structured lateral walls, therefore it was easy to transport and assemble (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1986: 212–213; Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 80–81).<sup>13</sup> We cannot

7 „...Komentioszt megalázóan megkötöztette, lábait fakalodába szorította, a követi sátrat leszakította, s ennek nyomán egy helyi szokás értelmében halálbüntetés fenyegette őt.” (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 63; Olajos 2012: 81)

8 „...dishonoured Comentiolus with chains, crushed his feet in the clamp of wooden stocks, tore apart the ambassador’s tent, and hence, according to a native custom, threatened the death-penalty.” (Whitby–Whitby 1986: 28)

9 „...entehrte den Komentios durch Fesseln, seine Füße ließ er durch einen schmerzenden Block zusammenpressen und das Zelt des Gesandten riß er ein, womit nach dem dort üblichen Brauch die Todesstrafe drohte.” (Schreiner 1985: 51)

10 In another place of Theophylact’s work, we find a further event connected with the destruction of a tent, when soldiers rebelled against general Priscus in the Persian front. During the rebel, Priscus’s tent was torn up (Whitby–Whitby 1986: 74; Olajos 2012: 81). The author used another verb in this part: *περσιζέω*, meaning ripping up (Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae III. 2, 1).

11 For the representation of a probably Avar tent/yurt at jar 2 of the Nagyszentmiklós treasure, see in detail, Göbl–Róna-Tas 1995: 34; Bálint 1998: 238–239; Róna-Tas 1998: 943–944.

12 According to Peter Alford Andrews, it is the only example for using this type of tent by peoples other than nomads (Andrews 1999: 1273–1274).

13 According to George T. Dennis, description of the Avar tent known from the work of Maurice refers to the round and spacious character of the Avar dwellings (Dennis 1984: 13).

therefore clearly determine the type of tents used by the Avars, from the available sources.<sup>14</sup>

The tent was an important part of the nomadic peoples' daily lives, and at the same time, these mobile homes played an important role in their religion and belief system as well. The yurt can be deemed as a reduced model of the universe, the macrocosm, its internal order followed a strict system, with a definite place for women, men, people of lower rank, etc. (Róna-Tas 1961: 96–97; Róna-Tas 1997: 177; Atwood 2004: 615; Iván 2004: 115).<sup>15</sup> However, not only the tent as a whole but also some of its elements carried symbolic significance in the nomadic peoples' beliefs. Among the parts of the tent, there was a symbolic meaning of the roof-ring, the entrance of the yurt, the column(s) holding the roof-ring, the tent-rope and the fireplace (Andrews 1999: 480–481; Atwood 2004: 615; Iván 2004: 115–118). In connection with our topic, it should be emphasized that the symbolism of the tent and its elements is mainly known from the late Mongol Age sources.

The tent itself could have been the symbol of power, the owner of the yurt, stability, and played an important role in the burial tradition of some nomadic peoples. The importance of the yurt is illustrated by the data in the governance manual compiled by Kublai, according to which there was a large tent with a flag among the nine badges of the Mongol Empire (Sagaster 1976: 295–299).<sup>16</sup> There is an excerpt in *The Secret History of the Mongols* that suggests that the Khan's yurt could, to some degree, embody the ruler. When setting up the Khan Palace tent, one of the night bodyguards had to be present as a lodging master and supervise the process (SRH 10. 232. cf. Ligeti 2004:<sup>2</sup> 90; Rachewiltz 2006: 160–161). The ruler's tent, which was stood out of other tents/yurts, could have also symbolized the ruling power. There is a passage concerning to the Huns in Priscus' work dating back to 449, according to which the Huns did not allow the Eastern Roman delegation to set up their tents on a hill. In this way, Attila's tent built on a flat area would have been lower than the tents that followed. Particularly because this way, Attila's tent, which was built on a flat area would have been lower than the tents of the delegation (Exc. De Leg. Rom. 3. cf. Blockley 1983: 250–251). Plano Carpini noted that the Mongols destroyed the yurts of the dead at their funeral. Thus, the destruction of the yurt, which symbolized the owner, also symbolized the death of the owner (Plano Carpini 12. cf. Györffy 1965:

14 In István Fodor's opinion, the yurt came from Inner Asia and was brought to Europe by the Huns. (Fodor 1983: 95–98). Later, Andrews and Zimonyi expressed the opinion that this type of tents appeared in Eastern Europe only later, as the consequence of the western expansion of the Türks (Andrews 1999: 107–110; Zimonyi 2005: 107–121).

15 Mongols punished with death those who continued some prohibited activity (urinated, spitted out food) inside the yurt. After such events, the tent could be used again only after fire purification ritual led by the shaman (Plano Carpini III. 7. cf. Györffy 1965: 62). Similarly, the yurts of the dead were "cleaned with fire", and could be used again only after this rite (Plano Carpini III. 15. cf. Györffy 1965: 66).

16 The symbols of power in the Mongol Empire included also a black flad, red horn, golden quiver, yellow drum, sabre decorated with diamonds, golden saddle, and belt (Sagaster 1976: 295–299).

64–65). The importance of the tent can also be observed in burial practices. In the case of the Huns and the Turks, this phenomenon is similar: the dead were laid out in their tents, thus making it a feretory and then they rode around the funeral tent several times (Iordanes 256. cf. Kiss 2005: 93; Chou-shu 50. cf. Liu Mao-Tsai 1958: 9–10).

The top part of the yurt was the roof ring, held by the roof poles. The roof ring itself functionally provided a source of light for the yurt and served as a smoke outlet (Róna-Tas 1961: 86–88; Róna-Tas 1997: 176). Due to its shape, it can be generally observed that it appears as a sun-symbol mostly at nomadic peoples. Besides, its association with the Dharma- or law-wheel appears relatively late, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the re-emergence of Buddhism. Ethnographic parallels show that one of the symbols of Buddha's teachings leading to enlightenment appears mainly in the form of an eight-spoke wheel at the nomadic peoples (Andrews 1999: 416, 1266). In *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the crushing of the roof ring, along with the destruction of other parts of the yurt, also symbolized the breaking of the power of the Merkit leader who abducted Börte (SRH 3. 105, 109. cf. Ligeti 2004:<sup>2</sup> 29–30; Rachewiltz 2006: 36–37). The smoke outlet in the roof ring can also be regarded as a typical element that represented the entrance to the afterlife (Andrews 1999: 149). This phenomenon is hinted at the symbolism emerging from the origin story of Genghis Khan's Family, in *The Secret History of the Mongols*. Alan-koa gave birth to three boys after the death of her husband, Dobun-mergen. Due to the precarious circumstance, her two sons born of Dobun-mergen have insinuated their mother who claimed that her three younger children derived from the God of the Sky. According to Alan-koa, this “brilliant, golden” man appeared through the smoke outlet of the yurt (SRH 1. 21. cf. Ligeti 2004:<sup>2</sup> 12; Rachewiltz 2006: 4, 263).<sup>17</sup> A similar story subsisted concerning the Uyghur Bögü Kagan, in whose yurt a maiden appeared every night for seven years (Ĝuvainī I. 8. cf. Boyle 1997:<sup>2</sup> 57). This detail of the late source is basically regarded as a dream image reflecting Manichean features, but it is also noticeable that the image of the entrance to the afterworld is linked to the identification of the smoke outlet reflecting steppe features (Andrews 1999: 149–150). The smoke-vent/light-opening of the roof ring also appears as a symbol of the entrance to the afterlife in another part of *The Secret History of the Mongols*. According to the source, Tengri punished Teb-Tengger by taking not only the life of the main oracle but also taking his body through the yurt's lightning opening in the evening twilight (SRH 10. 246. cf. Ligeti 2004:<sup>2</sup> 95; Rachewiltz 2006: 173; 2013: 886–887).

The wooden door of the yurt and its part, the threshold, also had an important meaning. The threshold of the yurt symbolized the dividing line between the microcosm of the tent and the macrocosm of the outside and formed a transition between the “outer” and the “inner” world (Andrews 1999: 1268; Iván 2004: 116). The already mentioned source detail from *The Secret History of the Mongols* also refers to this concerning the roof-ring, when a “shining” deity appears through the

<sup>17</sup> Besides the smoke-vent, the source also mentions the door of the yurt as a possible “passageway” for the man (SRH 1. 21. cf. Ligeti 2004:<sup>2</sup> 12; Rachewiltz 2006: 4, 263).

entrance of the yurt to Alan-koa (SRH 1. 21. cf. Ligeti 2004:<sup>2</sup> 12; Rachewiltz 2006: 4, 263). Besides, in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the crushing of the door, along with the destruction of other parts of the yurt, also symbolized the breaking of the power of the Merkit leader who abducted Börte (SRH 3. 105. cf. LIGETI 2004:<sup>2</sup> 29–30; Rachewiltz 2006: 36–37). Out of the parts of the yurt entrance, external sources especially emphasize the sacredness of the threshold. The accounts of Plano Carpini and Rubruck, as well as the report of the first voyage of Friar Julian, underline that, especially in the case of the Khan's and the leaders' tents, there is a ban on stepping on the threshold,<sup>18</sup> and that this has been strongly pointed out to European envoys. Whoever broke this law and stepped on the threshold could expect the death penalty (Plano Carpini III. 7; IX. 11, 33; Rubruck XV. 6; XIX. 5; XXIX. 28, 29, 37; XXX. 8. cf. Györffy 1965: 48, 64, 95–96, 102, 141, 147, 176–178, 187; Göckenjan, Sweeney 1985: 105, 117–118).<sup>19</sup> Also, a portion of the historical work of Rašīd al-Dīn's clearly indicates that one of the Mongolian customs concerning the entrance of the tent symbolized surrender. In 1264, Ariq Böke wanted to surrender to his brother, Kublai, and appeared in the court of the Khan. According to the Muslim author, Ariq Böke had to undergo a surrender ritual before coming to Kublai. Toluy's youngest son, standing in the tent door, leaned on the door with his shoulders, waiting for the Khan's permission to enter and his forgiveness (Rašīd al-Dīn II. 7, 2 cf. Boyle 1971: 261; Andrews 1999: 542–543).

It is evident from some data of Mongol sources that the column(s) and tent ropes holding the tent's roof-ring had a symbolic meaning. The crushing of the holding column(s) of the yurt's roof – along with the destruction of other parts of the yurt – symbolized the breaking of the power of the Merkit leader who abducted Börte (SRH 3. 105, 109. cf. Ligeti 2004:<sup>2</sup> 29–31). It is clear from Rubruck's description that the tent-rope may have had a similar sacredness like the threshold and it was not allowed to be touched (Rubruck XIX. 5. cf. Györffy 1965: 147).

The fireplace, which could have been localized in the middle of the yurt, also had a symbolic meaning for the nomads. It primarily symbolized the well-being and survival of the family (Zimonyi 2005: 245; Iván 2004: 116).<sup>20</sup>

The destruction or the damaging of the tent can be seen in various ways in written sources. On the one hand, only a general description of the phenomenon remained,

18 In Peter Alford Andrews' opinion, the origin of the sacredness of the threshold had practical reasons. To provide the massive, strong character of these mobile tents, the frame of the tent should have been stable. The most vulnerable parts were the entrance, and its part (threshold), that is why they tried to protect it on the first place (Andrews 1999: 1268).

19 Rubruck wrote that during their legation, one of his fellows tripped over the threshold of the yurt and the Mongols took away the culprit at once. It was the most significant notary of the Khan's court, the one who "judged the capital crimes", who examined his case. Finally, Rubruck's companion was not convicted, however, he never again was allowed to enter the Khan's tents (Rubruck XXIX. 29, 37. cf. Györffy 1965: 176, 178)

20 Plano Carpini wrote about the increased protection of fire at Mongols, e.g. one touching the fire with knife was put to death (Plano Carpini III. 15. cf. Györffy 1965: 66).

which only revealed that the yurt has been destroyed. On the other hand, in some cases, the sources provide accurate information on the way the tent was destroyed: breaking the roof ring column(s), tearing the tent, breaking the tent entrance. In the first case, Tengri or some otherworldly power destroy the tent, and in the second case, they destroy the residence either at the command of the ruler or when the enemy is victorious. Also, there is the possibility that the death of the yurt owner may be associated with the destruction of his yurt. The common feature of all three cases is that the damaging or the destruction of the tent appears as an ominous sign in the sources.

Ibn Fadlān emphasized that the Volga Bulgarians had seen Tengri's punishment when lightning destroyed the tents. That is the reason why they didn't touch dead bodies or objects in such tents (Ibn Fadlān 63. cf. Togan 1966, 64; Simon 2007: 63–64). The destruction of the tent or having it left intact, which can be interpreted as a heavenly sign, also appears in connection with the Mongol Age. After the death of the Khorasan governor Chin Temür around 1240, two candidates wanted to take the position of Chin Temür, his son Edgü Temür and Körgüz. To accomplish their goals, they both brought tents as gifts to Ögödei, the great Khan in the Karakorum. After the tent provided by Edgü Temür was built, the Khan sat on the throne situated in the structure. However, as Ögödei left the tent, a large whirlwind swirled and tore down the tent and its support column, which fell on one of the Khan's concubines. According to the source, Edgü Temür's honor was shattered when the tent was destroyed. However, the tent built by Körgüz was not hit by any natural disaster, and of course, he won the position (Ĝuvainī II. 28, 232–233. cf. Boyle 1997:<sup>2</sup> 495–496). The destruction of Arik Böke's tent also appears as a sinister sign, in his case the sign of defeat to Kublai. Toluy's youngest son was having a feast in the tent, when a whirlwind suddenly ripped it apart, breaking the tent into a thousand pieces and breaking the yurt's pillar. The superiors supporting Arik Böke saw this as a fatal sign that predicted his downfall against Kublai, and therefore turned away from him (Rašid al-Dīn II. 7, 2 cf. Boyle 1971: 261).

One passage of *The Secret History of the Mongols* reveals that the destruction of the leader's tent also refers to the destruction of the enemy. Concerning Temüjin's attack on the Merkits, who kidnapped his wife Börke, the source also strongly emphasizes, that the destruction of the tent's column, roof, and the door was a sign of the complete destruction of the enemy (SRH 3. 105, 109. cf. Ligeti 2004:<sup>2</sup> 29–31; Rachewiltz 2006: 36–37, 39).

In Plano Carpini's work, the motif of the destruction of the yurt is related to the death of the owner and the funeral ceremony (Plano Carpini III. 12. cf. Györffy 1965: 64–65).

We know very little about the various forms of punishment of nomadic peoples before the Mongol Age. For example, the Xiongnu punished disobedience within the army by death. There are relatively more sources available for the Mongols, who recorded that there were basically two types of punishment, depending on the gravity of the crime committed. Murder, fornication, running away from a battle, and high-

value theft were punishable by death. Smaller crimes were punishable by blows by a stick (Plano Carpini IV. 9; VI. 3; Rubruck VIII. 2. cf. Györffy 1965: 53, 68, 79, 130–131; Atwood 2004: 264; Aubin 2008). However, there is no evidence in the sources that the death sentence or any other form of punishment had any symbolic meaning for nomadic peoples.

In summary, we can conclude that the meanings of the terms used by Theophylact Simocatta are not univocal, so it cannot be stated that the author was merely thinking of destroying the tent or damaging a part of the tent (tearing the tent cover or breaking the tent roof column). It is clear from the examples listed above that, for nomadic peoples, the tent or yurt, in addition to being important in their everyday life, also played a significant role in their religious world and belief system. The tent or any of its components could have symbolized the power of the Kagan/Khan, stability, the sun, the gate of the afterlife, the boundaries of the universe and the human world, and so on. The damaging or the destruction of the tent can be inferred primarily from the sources of late Mongol period. It could have been the complete destruction, or perhaps the tearing of felt or other material covering the tent's frame, sometimes breaking or knocking over the column holding the tent. The damage to the tent was caused either by some otherworldly power, Tengri, or the ruler, or the enemy of the owner of the tent. They may have destroyed the yurt as a symbol of the death of the tent owner. In the cases listed above, the damaging of the tent primarily meant the loss of political power or social position, and secondly, it was a symbol of death. However, in none of the mentioned parallels does it symbolize the death penalty. Upon examining the parallels with the traditions that were customary at the Avars, we can conclude that the damaging of the tent symbolized some kind of sinister sign or death. Mostly, it signaled the perishing of power or a man himself. Thus, even though this Avar tradition was unknown in the customs of other nomadic people, it can be fitted well into the symbolic system of nomadic people concerning tents.

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