

# Błażej Cecota

---

## "Posledná vojna antiky. Avarský útok na Konštantínopol roku 626 v historických súvislostiach... : [recenzja]

---

Studia Ceranea : journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe 2, 240-243

---

2012

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

mentary to that passage lacks a single word on its historical and didactical context (p. 80–81). In comments to the descriptions of the conquest of Damascus there is no information about the other accounts of this event, which is quite important if we take into consideration its socio-religious significance (the discussion whether Damascus surrendered or was captured by the Muslims – p. 107–115). On the other hand the description of the Muslims after the conquest of Jerusalem would be more comprehensible if one added a comment on the history of the controversy surrounding the direction of prayer, or the context of the legend concerning the presence of the Jewish advisor at the side of the Caliph Umar (p. 147). Lack of references to secondary literature in *strictly* historical commentaries seems to be even more difficult to understand as they are not missing from the footnotes which concern the characters associated with Arabic literature, such as, for example, Ibn Ishaq Isa at-Tabb (p. 187, an. 371). Most interesting from our point of view are issues related to the description of the Byzantines. Here, too, there are some ambiguities. Heraclius's brother – Theodore, who led the fight against the Arabs in Syria, is mentioned in

the text several times. However, the author firstly calls him Theodoric (p. 63), then he states that in the *History* the emperor's brother appears as Ibn Saqallar Mihrab (without giving the source of his knowledge – p. 118, an. 272). Moreover, at the end he calls him *the unknown patriarch* (p. 129, an. 291). The text also lacks explanations of some of the phrases used by at-Tabari which clearly have features of idiomatic expressions (p. 86). In the main translation text (e.g. on p. 28) one can discover the following punctuation mark: (...). It is difficult to determine whether it is a signalled ellipsis in the original text, or the omission made by the author of the translation. The purpose of this stylistic treatment has been elucidated neither in the introduction, nor in the footnote.

The above mentioned minor comments do not diminish the significance of this publication which will certainly contribute to the increase of interest in the problems of Byzantine-Arab relations among Polish scholars. I sincerely hope that the author will continue his research on Tabari and that we can expect translations of the later passages of Tabari's work.

*Blažej Cecota (Łódź)*

**MARTIN HURBANIČ, *Posledná vojna antiky. Avarský útok na Konštantínopol roku 626 v historických súvislostiach* [The Last War of Antiquity. The Avar Siege of Constantinople, 626, in Historical Sources], Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, Prešov 2009, pp. 377.**

The book by Martin Hurbanič<sup>1</sup>, a Slovak Byzantinologist, is the first academic study which in a comprehensive manner describes the siege of Constantinople by the Avars in 626, an event of critical importance for the reign of Emperor Heraclius (610–641).

The work is divided into 11 chapters. The first one (*Od Triumfom k pádu*, p. 15–33) is preceded by an introduction, in which the author outlines the problem of the Avar siege in the historical memory of the Byzantines, and looks into the foreign policy of the Emperor Maurice,

<sup>1</sup> The author is a member of the Slovak Balkans Committee and Slovak Association of Byzantinologists, editor of scientific journals: "História", "Byzantinoslovaca", "Slavica Slovaca" and "Acta Historica Posoniensia". More important publications: *Byzancia a avarský kaganát v rokoch 623–624*,

HČSAV 55, 2007, p. 229–248; *Byzancia Slovania a avarský kaganát v období vlády cisára Foku (602–610)*, HČSAV 58, 2010, p. 3–14; *Byzantský "Commonwealth": hierarchické spoločenstvo alebo idea spolupatričnosti*, [in:] *Studia balcanica bohemoslovaca*, I, Zborník zo VI. medzinárodné balkanistické

concerning both the Balkans (towards the Avars and Slavs) and the Near East. The author did not limit himself to only diplomatic and military matters, but tried to show the described events in the broader context of internal affairs, especially of religion (Nestorians, Monophysites) and social issues (the policy towards demes, the system of distributing bread, etc.).

Chapter two (*Vládca tvrdej ruky*, p. 34–57) opening with consideration of the circumstances of the fall of Maurice, discusses the reign of the Emperor Phocas (602–610). M. Hurbanič belongs to the group of historians who firmly reject the “black legend”<sup>2</sup> of this ruler. According to the Slovak author the character of Phocas became a convenient excuse for the environments centered on Heraclius. One element of this myth was to include a claim that it is under the Phocas’s rule the empire lost Palestine, Syria and Egypt which is obviously not true (p. 34–35). Based on recent archaeological research Hurbanič proves that the military administration under Phocas quickly regained control of the traditional Byzantine border in the Balkans (p. 41–42). Describing the Byzantine-Persian struggle before Heraclius took the throne; the Slovak historian draws attention to the fact that it could have been influenced by the involvement of the Empire in Italy (p. 50) or by coteries at Phocas’s court (p. 53). The problem of Heraclius’s revolt was treated in a similar, comprehensive manner, raising the issues of social divisions in that period (p. 59) as

well as legendary and propaganda messages concerning the Phocas’s fall (p. 61).

In the third chapter (*Impérium na pokraji zániku*, p. 58–87) M. Hurbanič presents the situation in the East which Heraclius had to face after taking charge (including the religious and social issues). He rightly points out that the concerns in Italy or in Spain could have had an impact on the activities of the Byzantines (p. 63). The author skillfully analyses how the natural phenomena such as earthquakes could affect the morale of Byzantine armies prior to the first counter-offensive in the East (p. 65).

M. Hurbanič does not avoid difficult topics. For example, he argues with the views of the modern Israeli historiography on the interpretation of behavior of the Jewish community during the fall of Jerusalem in 614 (p. 69–70). With the use of the latest archaeological researches he confirms the questioned version of the events skillfully combining their results with the written sources (p. 71).

This is followed by an analysis of Heraclius’s diplomatic activity aimed at making peace with the Persians which contradicts the traditional image of the emperor as an uncompromising fighter. It is important that Hurbanič draws attention to the geopolitical significance of the clash between Persia and Byzantium, noting that Chosroes aspired to *hegemony of the old world* (p. 76) and the revival of *Achaemenid dream* concerning the dominion over the Mediterranean area (p. 77).

In the following chapter (*Herakleiov vabank*, p. 88–100), discussing the counteroffensive undertaken by Heraclius the author begins with the analysis of the attitudes in the Byzantine society, such as those concerning bringing the distribution of bread to an end or to natural phenomena such as eclipses (p. 89). He thoroughly discusses the problem of seemingly incomprehensible loyalty to the emperor who not only lost many lands during the wars with the Persians but could not provide the current standard of living for the inhabitants of Constantinople. The Slovak historian speaks in favor of the hypothesis according to which extraordinary requisitions helped Heraclius while he was withdrawing from the territories left to the Persians and Avars (p. 90–92). This allowed him to

*symposia organizovaného Ústavem slavistiky Filozofické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity v Brně a Historickým ústavem Akademie Věd České republiky, 25.–27. apríla 2005, Brno 2006, p. 33–42; Koncept byzantského misionárstva a patriarcha Fótios, [in:] Cyril a Metod. Slovensko a Európa. Zborník z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie Trnava 25.–29. mája 2005, Trnava 2007, p. 107–111; Avarské obliehanie Konštantínopolu roku 626 v byzantskej hagiografii, [in:] Byzantská kultúra a Slovensko, Bratislava 2007, p. 33–40.*

<sup>2</sup> As far as this issue is concerned, he follows such researches as D.M. OLSTER, *The Politics of Usurpation in the Seventh Century. Rhetoric and Revolution in Byzantium*, Amsterdam 1993 or M.J. LESZKA, *Zbrodnie cesarza Fokasa*, AUL.FH 67, 2000, p. 45–58.

pay the wages the army, and because of that, retaining the obedience of the residents of the Empire's capital was possible. Discussing the reasons for the success of the Byzantine offensive Hurbanič draws the attention not only to the military, but also economic, factors. Above all, he mentions the increasing fiscal burdens imposed on the inhabitants of Persia and the population living under the Persian occupation. Between 608 and 626 they increased by as much as 43 per cent (p. 96).

The fifth chapter of the work (*Nediplomatický úskok kagana*, p. 101–113) is devoted to the analysis of the negotiations between the Emperor and Khagan in 623. The many stages of preparation of the planned meeting and of the Avar ambush were illustrated by Hurbanič with the use of detailed maps. The relation is extremely detailed, every hour is important. Presentation of realities of the Avar betrayal of 623 is accompanied by reflections on the presence of this event in the Byzantine memory and its transfer to the Slavic chronicles (p. 109–111). The uprising of Samo is also discussed in the chapter. Hurbanič discusses it from the perspective of the foreign policy of the empire. One of the hypotheses was an alleged alliance with the Franks made to destabilize the internal situation in the khaganate (p. 111–113).

The subsequent part of the book (*Na život a na smrt'*, p. 114–136) focuses on the circumstances of the expedition Heraclius to the East. The author devoted much of his attention to the circumstances in which the Emperor's was acting in Armenia, Albania, and Northern Mesopotamia. He did not ignore the atrocities committed by the imperial army (p. 115–120). A considerable part of the analysis is devoted to the presentation of diplomatic efforts aimed at gaining a support from the princes of the Caucasus and Türküts (p. 120–124). The second part of the discussion in the sixth chapter analyzes the reasons which caused the Persians to march on Constantinople. Here, the author focuses only on the importance of this event for the Persian propaganda. An interesting plot relating to the conflict that developed between the two main leaders of Persian army – Šahin and Šahrvaraz was not taken into account. Perhaps it was this rivalry which was one of the main reasons for the decision to attack the capital of the empire (p. 129).

In the sixth chapter one can discover one of the most intriguing fragments of the dissertation – *Koristický nájazd alebo hra veľmoci?* ('Smash-and-grab attack or game of the super states?'), in which Hurbanič outlines the hypothesis stating that the Avars were not interested in the ultimate collapse of the empire as it was quite a substantial source of their income, in the form of tributes. At the same time the Khagan needed a success, which would balance the defeats suffered from the Slavic rebels immediately before the siege (p. 131–136).

The seventh chapter is devoted to military matters (*Avarské vojsko*, p. 137–153). The author deals with a description of particular Avar army units, especially heavy cavalry. A separate section of the chapter takes into consideration the presence of the Slavs among those besieging Constantinople. Hurbanič discusses the problem of self-identification of Slavs and the phenomenon of their acquisition of Avar customs and their transfer to the Avar elite. He also describes the problem of the position of the Slavs in the Avar army – was it a kind of alliance, or solely a direct dependence on the Avars? The author did not ultimately back any of the hypotheses, he points out however that the Slavs had to fight under the command of their chief officers. Hurbanič also reminds that the turn of 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries was a period of increased military effort for the Avars and in consequence increased war losses. Khagan was forced to supplement the ranks of Avar formations with people not related to the ethnic elite of the state (p. 141–143). The chapter is concluded with a discussion about the source materials on the participation of Bulgarians and Gepids in the siege of Constantinople (p. 143–145). Much of this section of the work is devoted to the question of siege engines and naval forces used during the siege (p. 146–153). The author supports the hypothesis according to which the Slavs travelled to the capital of the empire by land and did not sail along the shores of the Black Sea.

In the following chapter (*Konštantínopol*, p. 154–183) the author examined how the Byzantines were preparing themselves to defend Constantinople. The discussion on the location and capacity of the city walls is illustrated

with plentiful photographic material. Hurbanič focused here on presenting weaknesses in the defense system of the empire's capital, making understanding of the tactics used by the Avars easier (p. 154–170). The analysis is supported by maps. Some of these should be larger, as in the current format they are difficult to read, e.g. those related to the hypothetical line of fortifications in Blachernae (p. 166). The chapter was supplemented with the analysis of the earlier sieges of the city, including the attempts made by the Goths in 378, the Huns in 447 and by *magister militum* Vitalian in 514. Nevertheless, Hurbanič's attention is focused primarily on the attack of Zabergan's Kutrigurs in 559, as its course was in some aspects similar to the siege of the Avars (p. 172–173). In the following subsections the author discusses the number and armament of the basic units defending the city, the history and the way of recruiting self-defense units and the number of relief troops sent by Heraclius (p. 174–179).

In the chapters nine and ten (*Útok sa začal*, p. 184–205 and *Rozhodnutie padlo na mori*, p. 206–227) the Slovak historian examined the events directly related to the siege of the city. Anastasius's diplomatic mission, the aim of which was to discourage the Avars from taking military action (p. 186–189), was described in the introduction. The issue of the use of monoxylae (dugouts) by Slavs is treated by the author in great detail. The considerations concerning the location of the Bridge of Callinicus are also worth noting. The struggles over Blachernae, the least fortified section of the city, were described especially accurately.

In the last chapter of the dissertation (*Vítazi a porazení*, p. 228–258) the author brings up the question why the Avars were defeated. He rejects the version offered by the primary sources, according to which the lack of supplies forced the Avar army to withdraw. The author argues that the fighting took place during the harvest season, when there was no shortage of food. What is more the siege did not last long enough for the hunger to become a factor. The Slovak historian also points to a carefully planned and prepared strategy of the Avar khan. To support of this thesis he brought up such

facts as the choosing of the weakest parts of the fortification to carry out the decisive attack, an attempt to bring the Persians on the European shore of the Bosphorus, the coordination of the attack of the ground troops and the Slavic monoxyls. According to Hurbanič, a major cause of the Avar failure was the insufficient preparation of the siege engines. The author states that during the siege no gate, nor any larger section of the city walls were damaged (p. 231).

Much of the author's attention is devoted to the analysis of Theophanes's work concerning the letter of Chosroes. This letter was supposed to address the issue of whether Šahrvaraz was to be killed or not. Hurbanič analyzed numerous Syrian and Arabic sources. According to the Slovak Byzantinologist the contents of the message contained in the letter which was given to the Persian leader is a story made up for the purpose of explaining the causes of rebellion against the Shah Šahrvaraz (p. 241). In the subsequent fragments of the last chapter Hurbanič presents the history of Heraclius's offensive against Persia, the battle of Nineveh, the fall of Chosroes and the triumphant return of the emperor to Constantinople (p. 243–258).

In summary the author reviews the researchers' attitude towards the historical significance of the siege of the imperial city by the Avars, and supports the opinion stating that Constantinople was not in a great danger. The attack on Blachernae, on the other hand, where no integrated system of fortifications was present, was an attempt to save the situation after the failed assaults on the main walls, which took place several days earlier (p. 259–264).

The publication comes with numerous and highly useful illustrations, reconstructions and maps. The book is also equipped with an index of personal names and geographic areas.

The case study written by Hurbanič is an extremely important publication, broadening our understanding of the siege of Constantinople by the Avars. One only can regret that the work is written in Slovak, which severely hinders its reception in the West European and American academic centers.

*Błażej Cecota (Łódź)*