

The Western Roman Embassy to the Court of Attila in A.D. 449

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Based on the analysis of an early Byzantine source, The History of Byzantium and of the Period of Attila by Priscus of Panium, the author tries to form a plausible conjecture about the true purpose of the western Roman embassy to the court of Attila in 449, associating it with the Iusta Grata Honoria affair and taking into account some new aspects. The paper also deals with the encounters between the western Roman envoys and Priscus, and it gives a summary of Priscus' account of the journey of the eastern Roman envoys and their stay at the court of Attila.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 449,¹ yet another eastern Roman embassy set out from Constantinople for the court of the king of the Huns Attila. It was an immediate response to the arrival of Hunnic negotiators Edeco and Orestes to the eastern Roman capital in the spring of the same year. Their mission was to provide an additional emphasis to Attila's demands.² Namely, in 447, there was an outbreak of war between the Huns and the Eastern Roman Empire with such an intensity that had never been seen before. Attila had broken into Thrace and Moesia, and advanced deep into Greece, devastating as much as seventy towns. Since the imperial army led by three commanders, Aspar, Areobindus and Arnegisclus, could not oppose decisively to Hunnic onslaught, the eastern Roman court resorted customarily to diplomatic means, and a peace was finally concluded with the Huns (in 448).³

The Eastern Roman Empire suffered gravely from Hunnic attacks for quite some time, and these attacks were repeated ever so often. The so much needed rest had to be bought with even larger amounts of annual tribute. This tribute became a considerable burden for the imperial

¹ The date according to: F. ALTHEIM, *Geschichte der Hunnen* IV, Berlin 1962, p. 294.

² ALTHEIM 1962, p. 293.

³ ALTHEIM 1962, p. 292; O. SEECK, *Die Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt* VI, Stuttgart 1920, pp. 294-295, O. SEECK, s.v. *Attila*, RE, Bd. II 2, Stuttgart 1896, col. 2244; A. DEMANDT, *Die Spätantike. Römische Geschichte von Diokletian bis Justinian, 284-565 n. Chr.*, München 1989, p. 168.

treasury.⁴ As oppose to that, the Western Roman Empire was spared from Hunnic grasp. There were two factors that played decisive role in this. Firstly, the fact that the Western Roman Empire did not have by far the same financial possibilities as the Eastern Roman Empire. Secondly, the good relations that had developed between the western Roman *patricius* Aetius and Hunnic rulers.⁵ However, the formal benignity expressed by the Huns towards the western part of the Empire for quite a while was put on a serious test in the time of the eastern Roman embassy in 449. This would prove crucial regarding the future relations, especially because there are some indications that Attila was already turning against the Western Roman Empire in 448. In that sense, the mention of the western Roman envoys that were present at the court of Attila at the same time as the eastern Roman embassy is of special importance.

1.1 Priscus of Panium⁶ and his account of the eastern Roman embassy in 449

The History of Byzantium and of the Period of Attila by Priscus of Panium that came down to us preserved only partially in fragments and abstracts dealt most probably with the years 433 to 471, and it is the most important source for the history of Hunnic state and society during Attila's reign. We know little about the author himself. He was born almost surely in the Thracian town of Panium (Gr. Πάνιον), but the year of his birth is unknown. In his work, he covered the good deal of emperor Leo I's reign (he ruled 457-474), perhaps even the whole span of his rule. So it can be concluded that he was alive and writing in the mid 470s. One cannot even know with certainty what offices Priscus held, although it is beyond any doubt that he was well educated. The sources mention him to be a sophist, a rhetor, or even a historian. Based on his writings, one can conclude that he had solid rhetorical skills, and he may have been versed in law as well. Be that as it may, his reputation and expertise had to be known well enough in Constantinople by the year 449, otherwise the *comes* Maximinus would not have called him to join the diplomatic mission.⁷

⁴ In 431, the Constantinople was obliged to pay an annual tribute to the Huns in amount of the 350 pounds of gold. In 435, this payment was doubled (700 pounds), and even tripled (2100 pounds) in 447 (DEMANDT 1989, pp. 167-168; SEECK 1896, cols. 2243-2244).

⁵ As a young man, Aetius had spent some time with the Huns as a hostage, and he had turned succesfully to them for help in several occasions (O. SEECK, s.v. *Aetios* 4, RE, Bd. I 1, Stuttgart 1893, cols. 701-702; DEMANDT 1989, pp. 151-152, 154). On Aetius see also: PLRE II, s.v. *Aetius* 7, pp. 21-29.

⁶ This short account of Priscus' life and work was made on the basis of a paper by B. BALDWIN, *Priscus of Panium*, Byzantion 50 (1980) 18-61.

⁷ Priscus accompanied the *comes* Maximinus in two more occasions: to

The account of the eastern Roman embassy in 449 is preserved in the third fragment.⁸ Priscus begins his exposé with an interesting story about how the imperial eunuch Chrysaphius had won over Hunnic envoy Edeco with knowledge of the emperor Theodosius II for a plan to murder Attila.⁹ Priscus does not give an ethical qualification of this scheme nowhere in his text, so one can conclude that he thought of it as at least necessary, if not even approved it.¹⁰ To the *comes* Maximinus who was put in charge of the eastern Roman embassy was assigned Vigilas, officially as an interpreter, but in reality to help in carrying out the murderous design. Maximinus was not aware of the secret mission of his embassy.¹¹ Priscus on his part joined Maximinus at his request as a friend and an adviser.¹²

The members of the embassy left Constantinople and arrived at Serdica (Sofia) after a thirteen days' journey. During a banquet prepared for them after their arrival one could easily see the relations between Edeco and Orestes to be tensed. Namely, Orestes alluded to Edeco's plotting during the conversation with Maximinus which did not elude Edeco. The next day their journey continued. Then they arrived at Naissus that was deserted by its inhabitants after it had been destroyed in Hunnic attack.¹³ They stopped at the short distance from the river (probably

Rome in 450, and to Egypt in 452/3. Maximinus was a high civil official in the Eastern Roman Empire. In 435, he is mentioned as one of the *magistri scriniorum* who took part in drawing up the *Codex Theodosianus*. He died in 453 (W. ENBLIN, s.v. *Maximinus* 17, RE, Bd. S V, Stuttgart 1931, col. 665). On Maximinus and Priscus see also: W. ENBLIN, *Maximinus und sein Begleiter, der Historiker Priskos*, Byzant.-neugr. Jahrbücher 5 (1926/27) 1-9. BALDWIN (1980, 24) has characterized suitably Maximinus as a kind of a special emissary for urgent missions.

⁸ Based on the edition of J. Bekker and B. G. Niebuhr, *Excerpta de legationibus Romanorum*, Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae VII, Bonn 1829, which I used. In the editions of C. and Th. Müller (*Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum* IV), and L. Dindorf (*Historici Graeci minores* I), it is the eight fragment. R. C. Blockley (*The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire. Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus* II [= ARCA, Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs 6 and 10], Liverpool 1983) ranged it as the twelfth fragment.

⁹ Attila demanded later that Chrysaphius should be handed over to him, but the eastern Roman embassy led by the *patricii* Anatolius and Nomus, personal friends of eunuch, managed to persuade the king of the Huns to drop his demand (cf. *Prisc.*, fr 4, p. 212, 21 - p. 213, 18; O. SEECK, s.v. *Chrysaphios*, RE, Bd. III 2, Stuttgart 1899, cols. 2485-2486).

¹⁰ Thus BALDWIN 1980, 35.

¹¹ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 169, 17-18 (cited by page and lines based on the edition of Bekker-Niebuhr).

¹² *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 170, 11. Maximinus made a real effort to have Priscus agree to join the embassy which can be concluded on the basis of syntagma ἐκπιπαρήσας πείθει με, "he persuaded me by pleading with me" (cf. BALDWIN 1980, 20-21).

¹³ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 170, 2 - p. 172, 1. Naissus (Niš in Serbia) was captured by the Huns in 441. In 448, a buffer was created at the demand of Attila along the right bank of the Danube, extending from Singidunum (Belgrade in Serbia)

modern Nišava). The next day they came to the commander-in-chief of the Illyrian army (*magister militum per Illyricum*), Agintheus, who established his camp not far from Naissus. He handed them over the remaining five deserters out of seventeen that were promised to Attila.¹⁴ At the dawn of the next day, they went from the boundaries of Naissus (τῶν ὁρίων τῆς Ναϊσσοῦ) towards the Ister (Danube),¹⁵ and reached a shadowy area (χωρίον σννηρεφέες). Next they passed from these rough places (ἡ δυσχωρία) to the well wooded plain (ἐν πεδίῳ καὶ αὐτῷ ὑλώδει). There they were received by the barbarians who rowed them across the river (Danube). Having crossed the Danube, and proceeded about seventy stadia (cir. 13 km), the embassy stopped in a certain plain, while Edeco went to Attila to inform him of their arrival.¹⁶

Towards evening of the same day, two Huns came riding to them, and ordered them to go to Attila. Thus, on the next day, they arrived at the tents of Attila about three o'clock in the afternoon. The fact that the embassy was forbidden to set up its tent on the hill, because Attila's tent was in the plane shows Hunnic protocolar sensitivity.¹⁷ This was only an introduction to problems the embassy would come across. Not only Hunnic nobles asked them at the bidding of Attila about the purpose of their arrival, which they declined to answer, saying that they would tell everything to the king of the Huns in person, but Attila refused to receive them at all. The reason for it was that Edeco disclosed the plot to Attila.¹⁸

eastward to Novae (Svištov in Bulgaria), and of a breadth of five days' journey. Naissus now marked the frontier (ALTHEIM 1962, p. 293; DEMANDT 1989, p. 168; A. MÓCSY, *Pannonia and Upper Moesia*, London and Boston 1969, p. 350).

¹⁴ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 172, 2-8.

¹⁵ It's not entirely clear whether the embassy went along the valley of the river Timok (Timacus), or took a shorter way (F. BARIŠIĆ, *Prisk kao izvor za najstariju istoriju Južnih Slovena* [Priscus as a source for the earliest history of the South Slavs], *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* XXI (1952) 55). Most probably they chose the valley of the river Morava (Margus), especially because Priscus says that they thought they were travelling due west, and thus they were duly surprised when they discovered at the dawn of a new day that the sun rose in front (*Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 172, 19-21). Further temporal and geographical data provided by Priscus, regardless how scarce, indicate that the eastern Roman embassy was on the fringe of Pannonia after crossing the Danube.

¹⁶ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 172., 11 - p. 173, 10.

¹⁷ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 173, 11-21; ALTHEIM 1962, p. 295.

¹⁸ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 173, 21 - p. 175, 15; ALTHEIM 1962, p. 294. Edeco informed also Orestes about the plot. What surprises is the fact that Attila did not react to the disclosure of the plot as furiously as one would have expected. Apparently he thought of it as a good opportunity to exert further pressure on the eastern Roman court, at least what the payments are concerned, but not to provoke a new breach in relations. This is yet another indicator that Attila had directed undoubtedly his ambitions towards the Western Roman Empire, and that he was even prepared to wage war to fulfill them (G. ZECCHINI, *Aezio: L'ultima difesa dell'Occidente Romano*, Roma 1983, p. 263).

Afterwards Priscus went to a Hunnic noble named Scottas together with a certain Rusticius who spoke the Hunnic language and came to Attila's secretary Constantius on a private matter. By promise of rich rewards, Priscus managed to persuade Scottas to put in a good word for the embassy with Attila. Additional gifts should secure that the most influential Hun Onegesius¹⁹ would further the interests of the embassy.²⁰ This shows nicely that one could accomplish almost anything with the Huns if there were a promise of a substantial reward by the part of a petitioner (to be sure, we have to add that this phenomenon was not only a Hunnic peculiarity: the Roman bureaucracy expected the same *expressions of gratitude*).²¹ Finally, Attila decided to receive them. When they appeared before the king of the Huns – they were also accompanied by Vigilas who was an accomplice to the plot – Attila said to them after they had exchanged introductory greetings that he wished to the Romans what they wished to him. Thus he indicated indirectly to those who were informed that he was aware of the secret scheme for his murder.²² On this occasion, Attila also demanded that all of Hunnic deserters who entered the Roman service from the time when Aetius' son Carpilio was a hostage at the Hunnic court should be handed over; otherwise he threatened with war.²³ Priscus did not fail to mention that Vigilas was concerned, because the king of the Huns snarled at him during the audience, and called him a shameless beast (θηρίν ἀναιδές). Subsequently, Attila sent Vigilas back to Constantinople, on pretence of demanding again the return of the deserters, but actually to get the gold that was promised to Edeco for his part in the plot.²⁴

After the departure of Vigilas, the embassy remained one day in the same place, and the next day they set out with Attila for the northern parts of the country. However, after a short while, the embassy was forbidden to follow the royal entourage, because Attila proceeded to a village where he intended to enter into another marriage.²⁵ Thus the members of the eastern Roman embassy continued travelling alone. On

¹⁹ Onegesius was Attila's confidant, and superseded in authority only by the king himself (W. ENBLIN s.v. *Onegesius*, RE, Bd. XVIII 1, Stuttgart 1939, cols. 437-438). His brother was Scottas (ALTHEIM 1962, p. 284).

²⁰ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 176, 14 - p. 177, 16; ALTHEIM 1962, p. 294.

²¹ In another passage (fr 6), Priscus tells that Attila used Hunnic embassies to the eastern Roman court regarding the deserters to enable his confidants to increase their wealth, because Attila's envoys could expect generous gifts if they showed just a little bit susceptible (SEECK 1896, col. 2244; M. ŠAŠEL KOS, *The Embassy of Romulus to Attila*, Tyche 9 (1994) 106; cf. ALTHEIM 1962, 285).

²² *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 178, 3-9; ALTHEIM 1962, 294.

²³ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 179, 3-14.

²⁴ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 179, 18 - p. 182, 17.

²⁵ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 182, 18 - p. 183, 3; ALTHEIM 1962, 297.

this occasion, Priscus describes how they crossed several rivers (*Drecon*, *Tigas* and *Tiphesas*),²⁶ and says what kind of refreshment they took: they drank mead (μέδος) instead of wine, and ate millet (κέγχρος) instead of wheat. The attendants (ὑπηρέται) who followed them carried millet too, and offered them a drink made of barley which they called κάμον.²⁷ Towards evening, they pitched their tents near a marsh, but they were surprised by a night storm so they had to look for shelter in the nearby village that belonged to Bleda's²⁸ widow. She welcomed them warmly, offered them meal, drink and lodging, and sent them good-looking girls as companions for the night. According to Priscus, this was a compliment amongst the Huns. But they declined to take any further advantage of it.²⁹

They spent the next day in the village, and then they went on travelling. After a seven day's journey, they halted again at a village where they had to wait so that Attila might go in front. There they met with the western Roman envoys. Soon they proceeded and arrived finally at Attila's residence.³⁰ Priscus describes what it looked like, and how Attila was greeted solemnly there.³¹ The eastern Roman embassy stayed in Onegesius' house at his request, but they left it after a banquet, and set up its tent near Attila's palace so that Maximinus could be closer to the center of actions as much as possible.³² The next morning Maximinus sent Priscus to Onegesius with presents to arrange for a meeting. But when Priscus arrived at Onegesius' house (which was lavishly decorated), he found the doors closed. As he walked up and down the enclosure which surrounded the house, he met a man who was dressed according to Hunnic fashion, and who addressed him with a Greek salutation. Priscus entered into conversation with him. Priscus used this conversation to reveal his impressions about the way the Huns lived, and how their society functioned compared to that on the Roman soil. He defended the Roman legal system.³³

²⁶ Δρήκων, Τίγας, Τιφήσας. On the ubication of the rivers cf. BARIŠIĆ 1952, 57-58. According to Barišić, the embassy passed through modern southern and northern Banat, and Bačka on its way to Attila's residence (1952, 57).

²⁷ Also see BARIŠIĆ 1952, 57-60. In his paper, Barišić deals with the identification of ethnic group, and tries to prove that the territory of modern Vojvodina that was under the rule of Attila was inhabited by Slavs (60-61). Namely, he sees Slavs in the unnamed barbarians that Priscus mentions several times.

²⁸ Bleda was elder brother of Attila, and of higher rank in their joint rule. However, Attila got rid of him in a plot and took over the reign for himself (cf. SEECK 1896, cols. 2241, 2244).

²⁹ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 183, 3 - p. 184, 15; ALTHEIM 1962, 297.

³⁰ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 187, 11-14; ALTHEIM 1962, 297.

³¹ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 187, 14 - p. 189, 3; ALTHEIM 1962, 298.

³² *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 189, 3-15.

³³ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 190, 3 - p. 195, 7; ALTHEIM 1962, pp. 302-304.

After that, Priscus was received by Onegesius who promised to visit Maximinus. Priscus recorded the contents of their conversation in general outline.³⁴ The next day Priscus went to Attila's wife Kerka bringing with him the gifts for her. He describes her house that was situated inside Attila's palace surrounded by a palisade.³⁵ As he waited Onegesius to come, Priscus was approached by the Western Roman envoys who entered into a conversation with him about Attila's plans of conquest.³⁶ After a while Onegesius came out, and wanted to know what consular the Romans would send as an ambassador to Attila. Priscus informed Maximinus of this, and he was conducted to the presence of Attila after another exchange of messages. The king of the Huns told Maximinus he would receive only Nomus or Anatolius or Senator as the eastern Roman ambassadors,³⁷ and he refused to accept Maximinus' embassy, threatening with war if his demand would not be met.³⁸ Still, the members of the eastern Roman embassy were invited to Attila's banquet which shows that the king of the Huns held firmly to the rules of hospitality.³⁹ Priscus describes the banquet with much details. The western Roman envoys were also invited to it.⁴⁰ After the banquet from which the members of the eastern Roman embassy retired before it was over, Onegesius informed them that Attila decided to dismiss them.⁴¹ Next they received new invitations to banquets (by the part of Attila's wife and Attila himself), and after three more days the eastern Roman embassy, endowed with usual gifts, set out back for Constantinople, together with Attila's envoy Berich.⁴² Priscus described their journey back, and did not fail to mention the punishment which befell Vigilas for his treachery.⁴³

³⁴ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 195, 8 - p. 197, 8.

³⁵ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 197, 8 - p. 198, 15; ALTHEIM 1962, 298.

³⁶ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 198, 15 - p. 201, 20; ALTHEIM 1962, 311-313.

³⁷ They were all former envoys to Attila.

³⁸ It seems BALDWIN (1980, 38) rightly asserted that this does not mean the king of the Huns thought of these three envoys to be particularly susceptible, but he wanted to exert additional pressure on Maximinus to force him to further concessions.

³⁹ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 201, 21 - p. 202, 22.

⁴⁰ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 202, 22 - p. 206, 22; ALTHEIM 1962, pp. 298-299.

⁴¹ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 206, 23 - p. 207, 3.

⁴² *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 207, 16 - p. 209, 18; ALTHEIM 1962, pp. 299-300. Shortly after, Attila also sent as his envoys to Constantinople Orestes and Eslas (*Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 212, 19-20).

⁴³ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 209, 18 - p. 212, 19. He was forced to reveal everything he knew about the plot, or his son would be executed. Subsequently he was put in chains. He was not killed so that he could be used to blackmail the eastern Roman court.

2. The western Roman embassy in Priscus' account

2.1 Encounters between the two imperial embassies

As a member of the eastern Roman embassy in 449, Priscus had the opportunity to meet the western Roman envoys three times. He left us a brief account of this. Priscus met the western Roman envoys for the first time in a village where they arrived on the way to Attila's residence. According to Priscus, these were the *comes* Romulus, the *praefectus* of Noricus Promotus, and the military commander Romanus.⁴⁴ They were accompanied by the then correspondence secretary of Attila Constantius who had been sent by Aetius to the king of the Huns,⁴⁵ and Tatulus, the father of Attila's confidant Orestes who was Romulus' son-in-law.⁴⁶ Priscus says that the reason for arrival of the western Roman embassy was their intention to appease Attila who demanded the manager of a bank at Rome named Silvanus to be handed over to him, because he had once received some golden bowls (φιάλαι χρυσαί) from Constantius from Gaul. This Constantius had been sent by Aetius to Attila and Bleda to take care of their correspondence, and was a predecessor of Constantius from Italy in the same office. Namely, at the time when the Huns besieged Sirmium, the city of Pannonia (in 441), the said Constantius was given the bowls by the bishop of the city for the purpose of ransoming him if he were to survive the siege, or, if he were killed, of buying the freedom of those citizens who were being led off into captivity. However, Constantius did not honour the arrangement, but travelled to Rome, where he pawned the bowles, and received from Silvanus gold on condition that either within a stated period of time he return and repay his debt or Silvanus will keep the bowles. But Attila and Bleda suspected Constantius of treachery and had him crucified. Later when Attila found out of Constantius' trade with the golden bowles, the king of the Huns demanded Silvanus to be handed over to him, because he had allegedly kept the king's own possession. The western Roman envoys sent by Aetius

⁴⁴ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 185, 10-14.

⁴⁵ The Italian Constantius and his predecessor of the same name who was born in Gaul were both sent by Aetius to Attila as secretaries (*Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 176, 17-20, p. 186, 3-6). The first Constantius was suspected by Bleda and Attila of treachery and then executed so it is somewhat ironic that the second secretary had the same name. It seems that the Gallic Constantius was put to death, because he had supported the western Roman interests (ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, p. 107). The Italian Constantius was highly regarded by Attila who even tried to obtain a reach Roman lady from Constantinople for him to marry (*Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 208, 8 - p. 209, 11; O. SEECK, s.v. *Constantius* 12, RE, Bd. IV 1, Stuttgart 1900, col. 1102).

⁴⁶ On Orestes, Attila's personal secretary (in 449 and 452) and occasionally his envoy, cf. PLRE II, s.v. *Orestes* 2, pp. 811-812; W. ENBLIN, s.v. *Orestes* 12, RE, Bd. XVIII 1, Stuttgart 1939, cols. 1012-1013.

and the emperor Valentinianus III came to explain Attila that, as Constantius' creditor, Silvanus had received the bowles as sureties and not as stolen property, and that he had sold them for silver to the first priests he had come across, because the vessels dedicated to God's service must not be used for everyday purposes. If Attila would not yield to such founded arguments, or out of fear from God, he would be recompensed in gold, but Silvanus would not be surrendered, since they would not hand over a man who had done no wrong. After they had received the king's reply, they were supposed to journey back home.⁴⁷

Priscus met the same western Roman envoys again at the palace of Attila as he waited for Onegesius to come. This time they were accompanied by the interpreter Rusticius who was in the suite of Constantius (κατὰ Κωνσταντινον), and Constantiolus who was from the part of Pannonia under Attila's rule.⁴⁸ Priscus tells that the envoys did not have much success with Attila who treathened them with war if they did not surrender Silvanus or return the golden bowles. As they could not wonder enough at Attila's persistency in such a case, said Romulus, Orestes' father-in-law who was highly regarded by Priscus for his great experience, that Attila got carried away by his incredibly good fortune and power that arose from it so he did not have a taste for justified requests any more unless they could serve some purpose of his. Then the conversation in which Romulus dominated turned to Attila's plans of conquest.⁴⁹

Priscus had the opportunity to meet the western Roman envoys for the third time at the banquet given by Attila.⁵⁰ Although on the basis of the preserved part of Priscus' account one cannot know if the western Roman envoys were successful, it can be taken as fairly obvious that Attila accepted the compensation for Silvanus' bowles,⁵¹ but it is important to point out that the creation of problem and the king's persistency in this matter were to be used for putting pressure on the Western Roman Empire.

2.2 Conversation about Attila's plans of conquest

We have already mentioned the interesting conversation between the members of the western Roman embassy in the presence of Priscus.⁵² In a way, it was an attempt to see through Attila's intentions of conquest.

⁴⁷ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 185, 10 - p. 187, 5.

⁴⁸ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 198, 16-21.

⁴⁹ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 198, 21 - p. 199, 5.

⁵⁰ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 202, 22 - p. 203, 3.

⁵¹ L. VÁRADY, *Das letzte Jahrhundert Pannoniens. 376-476*, Budapest 1969, p. 319.

⁵² *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 199, 5 - p. 201, 20; ALTHEIM 1962, pp. 311-313.

Those involved in the conversation were aware of Attila's ambition and craving for power. This is easily seen from Romulus' remark that the king of the Huns was not just satisfied to have extended his rule over the whole of Schytia to the islands of the Ocean, and that he forced the Romans to pay him the tribute, but he also wanted to attack the Persians. When someone amongst the present asked which route Attila would choose to strike against the Persia, Romulus answered that this was going to be across Media which is close to Schytia and was already attacked by the Huns in the past (this was in 395 when the Huns had broken across Caucasus into Asia Minor and Syria⁵³). This route would not represent a problem for him, and he would subdue easily the Medes, Parthians, and Persians. But when those involved in the conversation expressed their wish Attila would indeed attack Persia so the Eastern Roman Empire could get a breathing space, Constantiolus said that not only the king's pressure would not loosen if he conquered Persia, but he would not be satisfied with the position of the Roman military commander any more,⁵⁴ and he would even demand the dignity equal to the one of the Roman emperors. At that time, said Constantiolus, the sword of a war god that was lost for a very long time and highly valued by the Schythian kings was discovered again by chance which could only assure Attila in his belief there were great things installed for him in the future. Attila was obviously perceived already by his contemporaries as a man driven by an almost irrational force and a notion that he was in a special grace of a divine power.⁵⁵

Although we have our knowledge of historical events to rely on, it seems somewhat unusual that Romulus named Persia as Attila's new aim. For, although Persia would be beyond any doubt a worthy prize, such an expedition would be complexed and involving great difficulties. Romulus who Priscus himself praised as a man of great experience was not so shortsighted politically that he would mention the possibility of Attila striking against Persia without more profound reason. Indeed, such a

⁵³ DEMANDT 1989, p. 167.

⁵⁴ According to the agreement of 433/4 (or later because the chronology of these events is not entirely clear), Attila was probably given the title of *magister militum*, and the Huns as *foederati* were ceded the province of Valeria and a large part of Pannonia Secunda, although the larger towns remained under Roman authority until they were conquered by Attila in 441 (ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 106; VÁRADY 1969, pp. 303-314). On the other hand, A. ALFÖLDI (*Der Untergang der Römerherrschaft in Pannonien II*, Berlin und Leipzig 1926, pp. 89-91), A. MÖCSY (s.v. *Pannonia*, RE, Bd. S IX, Stuttgart 1962, p. 582) and I. BÓNA (*Die Hunnen in Norikum und Pannonien*, in: Severin - zwischen Römerzeit und Völkerwanderung, Linz 1982, p. 181) thought that the Huns as *foederati* were ceded the provinces of Pannonia Prima and Savia. Be that as it may, the territory of modern Croatia is meant in both cases. Attila's title of the military commander was formally used by the Romans as a justification for payment of a huge tribute due to the Huns, because this was perceived as his pay in Roman service.

⁵⁵ ALTHEIM, 312-313.

thing would be a shift in all of Attila's actions as a ruler up to that time which were all directed to making use of the weakness of the Roman Empire, and subduing the various barbarian nations even further towards the west of Europe. It would be more reasonable to assume that Attila would continue exerting pressure on the Eastern Roman Empire. But Romulus failed to make such an observation. He did this not so much out of courtesy for Priscus who represented the eastern Roman embassy at that moment, but much more out of concern that the conversation would turn to the shift in Attila's policy towards the Western Roman Empire, and the causes for the change of his attitude. The fact that the western Roman embassy was obliged to appear at the court of Attila in the first place, regardless of how seemingly trivial was the reason for it (the so-called Silvanus' affair, or the affair with the golden bowles), shows that the relations between the two powers approached a crisis. For it is fairly clear that the king of the Huns was seeking an excuse for action. By directing the conversation to the discussion of Attila's plans of conquest, Romulus diverted the attention of his fellow interlocutors from current problems (Priscus' interest in the purpose of the western Roman embassy is significant for that matter). So much more uncomfortable must have seemed to Romulus the remark of Constantiolus that Attila's ambition would not shrink from anything until he was placed on equal footing with the Roman emperors. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Constantiolus actually saw through the aspirations of the king of the Huns. As the future events will show, the breach between Hunnic superstate and the Western Roman Empire was at hand.

2.3 Note on the relations between the western and eastern Roman embassies in Priscus

The fact that two imperial embassies were present at the court of a barbarian king at the same time draws necessarily the attention of a researcher, and gives an opportunity for various conjectures. Was the arrival of the embassies perhaps coordinated? Priscus does not indicate that this was the case. After all, the relations between the two imperial courts in the formally still united Empire were not as cordial as one would wish for. There are several examples that demonstrate the strong rivalry, frequent frictions, and exploiting of each other's weaknesses. On the other hand, one cannot deny a certain feeling of holding in together if some danger threatened equally both sides.

As we have already said, Priscus left us a testimony of three encounters between the embassies, recording carefully everything he managed to find out about his western Roman colleagues from themselves. As soon as they first met, Priscus asked them about the purpose of their arrival to the court of Attila, and found out their names, the offices they held, and what were their relations. As far as this is concerned, Priscus could only

regret that his embassy did not include such reliable and trustworthy persons who could guarantee a direct access to the king of the Huns. True, Priscus does not mention whether the western Roman envoys were told of why the eastern Roman embassy set out on its mission in the first place, but there is no reason to doubt that they were informed of it as soon as they had the opportunity to talk to Orestes. That the embassies might act together was out of the question, and it was surely not discussed as an option, because this would necessitate the prior approval of both Emperors.

On the occasion of the second encounter, the western Roman envoys addressed Priscus, who was alone at the time, with a question first, but he did not fail to return them in the same manner, noticing no doubt their discontent which could only increase his curiosity. Hence it is no wonder that Priscus played probably a passive role in the conversation about Attila's plans of conquest, listening carefully to what was discussed so he might find out something more. Regarding the third encounter, at the banquet given by Attila, Priscus says nothing of whether there was a new conversation between the western and eastern Roman envoys: each of the embassies were probably preoccupied by their own worries.

So what can be deduced about the relations between the eastern and western Roman embassies? It seems that all remained in the limits of courtesy contacts and exchange of basic informations without entering the details. Moreover, what follows from Priscus' account is that it was chiefly he who was interested in the mission of the western Roman embassy (for he never mentions any Maximinus' instruction regarding this). As for the western Roman envoys, they did not apparently show much of an interest in the affairs of the eastern Roman embassy. But this was probably because they could get all the informations they needed at the source itself, from Orestes who might have even revealed to them that the imperial court at Constantinople had devised the murder of Attila.

3. Circumstances surrounding the western Roman embassy in 449

3.1 Iusta Grata Honoria

Simultaneously with the Silvanus affair, there was another affair that threatened to spoil seriously the relations between the Western Roman Empire and the Huns. For Iusta Grata Honoria, the sister of the emperor Valentinianus III, conspired behind her family's back with the king of the Huns. At the time of Romulus' embassy, the whole matter was not yet known to the general public, but it came to light a few months later, in 450.⁵⁶

Iusta Grata Honoria was the daughter of the western Roman emperor Constantius III and Aelia Galla Placidia, the daughter of the emperor Theodosius I, and sister of the emperors Arcadius and Honorius. She was born between October 417 and September 418.⁵⁷ After Valentinianus acquired the throne of the Western Roman Empire in 425, Honoria received the title of Augusta which enabled her to participate in the rule.⁵⁸ This was done that she could step into her mother's place as regent if something were to happen to Galla Placidia.⁵⁹ But as Theodosius II's sisters were all devoted to chastity and had to remain unwedded (amongst them Pulcheria, the Augusta and former regent to her brother), so Honoria was denied the right to marry, since her husband could aspire to the position of a joint ruler.⁶⁰ As a self-willed young woman, she did not appreciate her status and the obligations forced upon her, and she rebelled. This rebellion took a form of a love affair with the manager of her estates (*procurator*) Eugenius, probably in 434, when she apparently conceived and was sent off from Ravenna to Constantinople.⁶¹ There her aunts were supposed to influence her in the atmosphere of piousness and moral purity, and quell her temperament. Surely, the general public was not made aware of the scandal and Honoria was not deprived of her Augusta title, because this would have stirred up many unpleasant questions, and because she was probably still regarded as a possible regent. It seems she was soon back in favour and returned to Ravenna. Perhaps Galla Placidia called her daughter back on the occasion of Valentinianus' wedding in 437, or she did so in an attempt to restore the balance of influence after Valentinianus had created his wife Eudoxia Augusta in 439. But ambitious Honoria was not

⁵⁷ O. SEECK, s.v. *Honoria* 5, RE, Bd. VIII 2, Stuttgart 1913, col. 2291; J. B. BURY, *Iusta Grata Honoria*, JRS 9 (1919) 1. On Iusta Grata Honoria see also: PLRE II, s.v. *Iusta Grata Honoria*, pp. 568-569.

⁵⁸ SEECK 1913, col. 2291; BURY 1919, 3-4; idem, *History of the Later Roman Empire (from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian A. D. 395 to A. D. 565)* I, London 1923, p. 224; ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 109.

⁵⁹ BURY 1919, 5.

⁶⁰ SEECK 1913, col. 2292.

⁶¹ Cf. *Marcellinus Comes, Chronicon*, s.a. 434. It is been usually taken that this affair happened fifteen years later (BURY 1919, 6, 10; idem 1923, p. 289; VÁRADY 1969, pp. 315-316; PLRE II, s.v. *Eugenius* 1, p. 416, s.v. *Iusta Grata Honoria*, p. 568), and that the chronicler confused the indiction cycle (Bury 1919, p. 13), and his statement on Honoria's pregnancy and her expulsion to Constantinople has been rejected (BURY 1923, p. 289, n. 3; S. I. OOST, *Galla Placidia*, Chicago 1968, pp. 283-185; VÁRADY 1969, p. 504, n. 787), even as a mere court gossip (O. J. MAENCHEN-HELFEN, *Die Welt der Hunnen*, Wien-Köln-Graz 1978, p. 98). But this need not be so, and the chronicler's entry is best explained if we accept the fact of Honoria's presence in Constantinople as authentic (for arguments see: B. CROKE, *The Chronicle of Marcellinus (translation and commentary)*, Sydney 1995, pp. 80-81, n. 434).

satisfied with her diminished role,⁶² and Valentinianus certainly did not look upon his sister's attempts to participate in the rule with liking. It is quite possible that she intrigued against her brother, looking for a suitable candidate whom she would marry and elevate to the throne. But the Emperor discovered her scheming, had her put under strict surveillance, and betrothed her compulsory to a wealthy senator named Flavius Bassus Herculanius (consul in 452) who could be depended upon to resist if his wife attempted to draw him into revolutionary designs.⁶³ This time Honoria was divested of her Augusta title.⁶⁴

As such an arrangement forced upon her did not appeal to Honoria, she decided to do something. She sent a trusted servant, a eunuch named Hyacinthus, to Attila, with her signet ring and a sum of money, requesting his assistance to prevent her forthcoming marriage.⁶⁵ Was Honoria prompted to this step by the fact that her mother too was once married to a mighty barbarian ruler, the king of the Visigoths Athaulf? Be that as it may, Attila received the message probably in the spring of 449.⁶⁶ The king of the Huns surely saw this as an excellent opportunity to fulfill his most daring plans. Very likely Honoria did not mention in her request the possibility of marrying Attila, but he interpreted it precisely so. Still, he decided to wait as he probably thought it was not the right time to act openly let alone to enter into an armed conflict.⁶⁷ After all, he was currently being occupied with the negotiations with the court at Constantinople, and engaged into testing of flexibility of the court at Ravenna towards his seemingly whimsical demands.

But in 450 he determined it was the appropriate moment. In the spring or summer he addressed himself directly to the senior Augustus Theodosius II, demanding from the Emperor to ask Valentinianus III to surrender immediately Honoria to the Huns.⁶⁸ Theodosius indeed

⁶² BURY 1919, 8-9.

⁶³ BURY 1919, 9; idem 1923, p. 289.

⁶⁴ BURY 1919, 9. In February 450, the western Roman court sent at the instigation of the pope Leo I a letter to the emperor Theodosius II regarding the Eutychian controversy. There were only the emperor Valentinianus III, and the empresses Galla Placidia and Eudoxia named as addressers, while Honoria was left out (W. ENBLIN, s.v. *Valentinianus III*, RE, 2. Reihe, Bd. VII A2, Stuttgart 1948, col. 2248).

⁶⁵ BURY 1919, 9; idem 1923, p. 290; SEECK 1913, col. 2292; ALTHEIM 1962, p. 314.

⁶⁶ BURY (1919, 10; idem 1923, p. 290.) mentions the year 450. However, VÁRADY (1969, p. 316) says that this was the year Attila found out about Honoria's punishment. I believe that Attila was prompted to address himself to Theodosius II by the fact that Honoria was supposed to marry Herculanius very soon. The marriage took place probably in 450, and certainly before 452 when Herculanius became a consul (PLRE II, s.v. *Iusta Grata Honoria*, p. 569).

⁶⁷ VÁRADY (1969, p. 316) even mentions the possibility of Attila obtaining a postponement from Honoria through an embassy.

⁶⁸ BURY 1919, 9-10; idem 1923, p. 290.

advised his younger imperial cousin to comply with Attila. It was a welcome opportunity for him to divert the Hunnic pressure from his part of the Empire, and perhaps to redeem himself because he had agreed to the plan to murder Attila not so long ago. Valentinianus III must have been furious. It is easily possible that he found out about his sister's excess already in 449,⁶⁹ but he did not take any obvious steps, because he wanted to avoid the whole case becoming known to the public. The conduct of Theodosius II after the whole affair was discovered shows that Valentinianus III was right. But it was too late. What remained to the Emperor was only to vent his anger on the main culprits for the trouble he found himself in. Hyacinthus' destiny was terrible. He was tortured and then beheaded. Honoria escaped a severe punishment only thanks to the intercessions of her mother whom she was entrusted to.⁷⁰

However, Attila sent an embassy to Ravenna in 450 after the death of Theodosius II and accession of Marcian to the throne, intervening in behalf of Honoria and demanding that she would be given the right to share the imperial power which was naturally refused.⁷¹ In the second embassy to the western Roman court that happened towards the end of the same year or at the beginning of the next Attila went one step further: he officially asked Honoria's hand in marriage and a half of the Western Roman Empire as a dowry. Of course, he received another negative response.⁷² Regardless of the meaning and the tone of Attila's demands, it seems that the sending of these two embassies shows that the king of the Huns was interested in the peaceful fulfillment of his demands.⁷³ Nevertheless, Attila always counted with the possibility of war. Already in 448 he came into contact with a certain doctor named Eudoxius, a leader of the Bacaudae, who escaped from the Gaul to the Huns,⁷⁴ and in the spring of 450 the king of the Huns made a new agreement with the Eastern Roman Empire by which he agreed to many concessions to secure the Danubian frontier.⁷⁵ Thus started Attila's campaign against the Western Roman Empire at the beginning of 450.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ On illuminating reasons for this hypothesis see: ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 110.

⁷⁰ SEECK 1914, col. 16; idem 1913, col. 2292; idem 1920, pp. 297-299; BURY 1919, 10; ENBLIN 1948, cols. 2249-2250; ALTHEIM 1962, p. 314.

⁷¹ ENBLIN 1948, col. 2251; SEECK 1920, pp. 299-300; BURY 1919, 10; ALTHEIM 1962, p. 315.

⁷² ENBLIN 1948, col. 2251; SEECK 1920, p. 300; BURY 1919, 10; ALTHEIM 1962, p. 316.

⁷³ VÁRADY 1969, p. 317.

⁷⁴ DEMANDT 1989, p. 154; SEECK 1920, pp. 301-302; idem 1896, cols. 2245-2246; VÁRADY 1969, p. 316.

⁷⁵ ALTHEIM 1962, p. 310. The new emperor Marcian repudiated the agreement, but he did not react to the Hunnic invasion of Gaul in 451.

⁷⁶ Attila demanded again in 452 as he was withdrawing from Italy that Honoria and her inheritance should be handed over to him, threatening that he

3.2 Members of the western Roman embassy in 449

Priscus mentions three very high civil and military officials from the provinces of Noricum and Pannonia as the members of the western Roman embassy.⁷⁷ The embassy was led by Romulus (Ῥωμύλος), *a man honoured with the dignity of a comes* (ἀνὴρ τῇ τοῦ κόμητος ἀξίᾳ τετιμημένος), and the next dignitaries were Promotus (Πριμοῦτος), *the head of the district of Noricum* (τῆς Νωρίκων ἄρχων χώρας), and Romanus (Ῥωμανός), *the commander of military units* (στρατιωτικοῦ τάγματος ἡγεμών).⁷⁸ Romulus was probably the *comes* of Illyricum (*comes Illyrici*), the highest military authority in the Western Illyricum. As for Promotus, he was certainly a governor of one of the provinces of Noricum, perhaps of the Riparian Noricum (*praeses Norici ripensis*).⁷⁹ The precise military office held by Romanus isn't specified. L. VÁRADY has expressed the opinion that Romanus may have been a commander of the field troops (*comitatenses*) with the headquarters at Poetovio, and in the rank of a *praefectus*.⁸⁰ H. CASTRITIUS has suggested that Romanus may have been a *dux*, possibly of Pannonia Prima or Noricum Ripensis,⁸¹ while R. C. BLOCKLEY has proposed two possibilities: Romanus may have either been *dux* or *comes rei militaris*.⁸²

The embassy was also joined by Constantius who had recently become a new Attila's secretary, and Tatulus, the father of Attila's confidant Orestes. For both of them Priscus says *that they made the journey together with them <the mentioned officials> not because of the embassy, but from friendship and also out of favour* (οὐ τῆς πρεσβείας ἔνεκα ἀλλὰ οἰκειότητος χάριν ἅμα σφίσιν αὐτοῖς τὴν πορείαν ποιοῦμενοι). The identical was the position of Priscus in the eastern Roman embassy, because he too went as a friend.⁸³ Constantius succeeded his predecessor as a secretary in charge of Attila's correspondence. Aetius sent him to the king of the Huns some

would do worse things unless he were complied with (BURY 1919, 10). R. GROSSET (L'Empire des steppes, Paris 1980, p. 122) even says that the pope Leo I promised Attila Honoria's hand, but this is most dubious as he does not give the source of the information.

⁷⁷ Prisc., fr 3, p. 185, 10-14. Cf. ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 109; VÁRADY 1969, p. 319; H. CASTRITIUS, *Die Grenzverteidigung in Rätien und Noricum im 5. Jh. n. Chr. Ein Beitrag zum Ende der Antike*, in: Die Bayern und ihre Nachbarn, Teil 1, Herwig Wolfram, Andreas Schwarcz (hrsg.), Wien 1985, p. 25. It is necessary to point out that Priscus is our only source that mentions them.

⁷⁸ On Romulus, Promotus and Romanus cf. PLRE II (s.v. *Promotus* 1, p. 926, s.v. *Romanus* 2, pp. 946-947; s.v. *Romulus* 2, p. 949).

⁷⁹ ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 109; PLRE II, s.v. *Promotus* 1, p. 926; CASTRITIUS 1985, p. 25.

⁸⁰ VÁRADY 1969, p. 321.

⁸¹ CASTRITIUS 1985, p. 25.

⁸² BLOCKLEY 1983, p. 384, n. 46.

⁸³ BALDWIN 1980, 22. Cf. the text with the note 12.

time before,⁸⁴ and in 449 he was returning to his employer after he had finished his business in Italy, a part of which was surely the mission regarding the Silvanus affair.⁸⁵ And Tatulus was induced to join the envoys among other things by the fact that his son Orestes was married to the daughter of *comes* Romulus. Moreover, Tatulus was a Pannonian from the province of Pannonia Secunda.⁸⁶

The western Roman embassy was sent by Aetius and Valentinianus III from Ravenna, probably as an immediate response to a Hunnic diplomatic action,⁸⁷ and its mission, as we have stated before, was to clarify the misunderstanding regarding the Silvanus affair and to offer Attila an adequate compensation. There are no sufficient data to chart for certain the route that the embassy travelled until it arrived to the court of Attila. Nevertheless, Priscus mentions the city of Poetovio with regard to the embassy (fr 3, p. 185, 22). It is commonly accepted that Priscus designated this town as a birth place of the *comes* Romulus' daughter, the wife of Orestes and mother of the last western Roman emperor in Italy Romulus Augustus. This hypothesis depends entirely on where a lacuna in Priscus' text is placed. We will not deal with linguistic and logical problems regarding the assumption.⁸⁸ However, the reading indicating that Poetovio was just a stop on the way of the western Roman embassy seems much more probable.⁸⁹ ŠAŠEL KOS has asserted that the *comes* Romulus and Attila's new secretary Constantius may have been met by the governor Promotus and the military commander Romanus in Poetovio.⁹⁰ But VÁRADY has already rejected such a possibility, pointing out to Priscus' text Κωνσταντίος μὲν διὰ τὴν ἐν ταῖς Ἰταλίαις προϋπάρξασαν πρὸς τοὺς ἄνδρας γνῶσιν (*Constantius of course got himself well acquainted with these men during his stay in Italy*), from which it can be apparently concluded that all three envoys went from Italy.⁹¹ I believe that Poetovio was fixed as an obligatory station at the very beginning of the embassy, because both

⁸⁴ Priscus says that the Gaul Constantius was executed at the order of both Bleda and Attila (fr 3, p. 186, 16-18), and that the Italian Constantius was sent by Aetius to Attila alone (fr 3, p. 176, 17-20, p. 185, 15-16). Attila became a sole ruler in 445 (SEECK 1896, col. 2244), and so the Italian was sent to him certainly after 445, probably not long before the year 449.

⁸⁵ VÁRADY 1969, p. 319.

⁸⁶ ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 109.

⁸⁷ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 186, 20 - p. 187, 4; VÁRADY 1969, pp. 318-319; ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 109.

⁸⁸ On this cf. ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 108-109.

⁸⁹ Ὁ γὰρ αὐτοῦ <Τατοῦλου> παῖς Ὀρέστης Ῥωμύλου θυγατέρα ἐγεγαμήκει <...> ἀπὸ Παταβίωνος τῆς ἐν Νωρίκῳ πόλεως ἐπρεσβεύοντο (...), his <Tatulus'> son had married a daughter of Romulus <lacuna> They were making this embassy from Patavio, a city in Noricum, etc.

⁹⁰ ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 109.

⁹¹ VÁRADY 1969, p. 320.

Promotus and Romanus may have had to perform some tasks there before they would continue their mission. Besides, it is quite possible that they were supposed to be joined there by Tatulus who may have waited for them in Poetovio. In that case, Promotus and Romanus may have been sent there from Ravenna even earlier on to inform Tatulus of the mission. But this is only an assumption without a real proof in the sources.

What comes to attention regarding the composition of the western Roman embassy is that it included the individuals who had access to Attila's closest associates and therefore to the king himself, and at the same time who had high connections both at the western Roman court and at the local level. By this I mean primarily Romulus who was a man of distinguished reputation in the Empire and the father-in-law of Attila's personal secretary Orestes as well. The envoys were of course joined by Orestes' father Tatulus and thus the whole diplomatic mission had a more personal note. Moreover, Constantius was Aetius' choice for Attila's secretary, and there is no reason to doubt that he was given the same task as his predecessor: to inform Aetius of all the important things that were going on at the court of Attila. The remaining two members of the embassy, Promotus and Romanus, were probably chosen both for the representation as they were the highest civil and military provincial officials, and for their expertise: their administrative and military districts were situated on the very border between the Empire and the region of Pannonia under Hunnic rule, and they protected directly Italy. One must not forget either that both Tatulus and Orestes were Pannonians. The answer to a question why was so important for the western Roman court to send people who could gain an easy access to Attila we shall try to give by analyzing the very purpose of the embassy.

3.3 Purpose of the western Roman embassy in 449

M. ŠAŠEL KOS has nicely observed that a historian might be puzzled as to why Attila, eight years after the fall of Sirmium, would suddenly wish to clear up the affair with the golden vessels of the bishop of Sirmium.⁹² We have already stated that Attila wanted probably to exert pressure on the Western Roman Empire. The Silvanus affair was not surely a purpose for itself so one can wonder as to why it would be actualized precisely now, although it is fair to say that Attila found out about the whole case apparently some time after the first secretary named Constantius had been executed under suspicion of threachery.⁹³

⁹² ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 109.

⁹³ VÁRADY 1969, p. 318. Priscus (fr 3, p. 186, 18) says μετὰ δὲ χρόνον (in time).

The western Roman embassy was an answer to Hunnic embassy sent previously by Attila which, as it seems, also included the Italian Constantius.⁹⁴ Since the western Roman envoys were at the court of Attila together with the eastern Roman envoys, it can be concluded that they went on their missions approximately at the same time, that is, in the summer of 449. Thus it can be deduced that Attila sent probably simultaneously both of his embassies to Constantinople and Ravenna respectively, that is, in the spring of 449. Approximately in the spring of 449, Iusta Grata Honoria made a contact with the king Attila. The synchronism of both events has necessarily led us to the idea of their close connection. Although there are no evidence for this in the sources, it seems that the mentioned western Roman embassy was indeed inseparably connected with the Iusta Grata Honoria affair. This has been already suggested by L. VÁRADY and then repeated by J. ŠAŠEL.⁹⁵ Now we shall try to stress several new points.

We have already mentioned that the western Roman embassy included two close relatives of Attila's confidant Orestes. The two remaining envoys may have also been his acquaintances, and there is no doubt that he knew Constantius who, like himself, was a servant of the king of the Huns. In view of the position that Orestes had in Attila's ruling structure, it would be difficult to imagine that Hyacinthus' negotiations in behalf of Iusta Grata Honoria could have remained a secret to him. What arises inevitably when making further conclusions, is a question of Orestes' loyalty towards Attila. It had to be limited by his origin, and it is very hard to believe that Orestes would not try to inform his father Tatulus, his father-in-law Romulus, or Aetius himself for that matter about the events that concerned the Western Roman Empire.⁹⁶ He may have even used Constantius as his go-between. It is also interesting to mention that even Orestes may have become Attila's secretary on the intercession of Aetius.⁹⁷ It seems that the western Roman *patricius* tried to have Attila surrounded by his personal trustees who would inform him of anything important that was going on at the court of Attila and of the king's plans. As we know, one of such trustees, the Gaul Constantius, payed for his zeal with his life.

So what was the real purpose of the western Roman embassy in 449? On the surface, the misunderstanding regarding the Silvanus affair had to be cleared up, and a compromise solution had to be found. Priscus who showed great interest in the reason for arrival of the western Roman

⁹⁴ VÁRADY 1969, p. 319.

⁹⁵ VÁRADY 1969, pp. 317-318; J. ŠAŠEL, *Aquileia, Ravenna e Poetovio: contatti e rapporti*, in: *Opera selecta*, Ljubljana 1992, pp. 643-644.

⁹⁶ ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 110.

⁹⁷ ENBLIN 1939, col. 1012.

envoys was also told of this. But, the real aim of their mission, hidden from the general public, pertained probably to gathering of information and to counseling: the envoys were supposed to consult Orestes on the possible actions of the king of the Huns and their consequences, and to try to think of a way how to solve this new situation in a manner that would favour the Western Roman Empire, that is, to make Attila realize that Valentinianus III would never accept his connection with Iusta Grata Honoria.⁹⁸ The embassy may have also been ordered to engage into negotiations with Attila regarding the bordering areas.⁹⁹ The words of Romulus who said that Attila got carried away by his incredibly good fortune (*ἡ αὐτοῦ μεγίστη τύχη*) and power that arose from it so he did not have a taste for justified requests any more may have been an allusion to Honoria as well as an indication that Attila would not be persuaded to drop the whole case.¹⁰⁰ Aetius and the western Roman court were beginning to see more clearly what were Attila's intentions.¹⁰¹ Although it did not come to open breach at that time, the subsequent events (invasions of Gaul and Italy by Attila) showed that the mission of the western Roman embassy was not successful.

Conclusion

The true dimension of the western Roman Embassy in 449 is best explained by the hypothesis connecting it with the Iusta Grata Honoria affair. The very composition of the embassy shows that it was very important to gain initial advantage in communication with Attila because of genuine war threat, and to acquire information known only to the closest associates of the king of the Huns. The key person who could guarantee such a thing was Attila's personal secretary Orestes whose father-in-law and father were both members of the embassy. The fact that a contemporary source such as Priscus is silent about this connection does not necessarily mean it did not exist. Valentinianus III was very interested in keeping the affair away from the general public, judging correctly what the reaction of his imperial colleague at Constantinople might be. Therefore is quite understandable that Priscus was not told of anything, although one cannot accuse him of not trying to find out why the west-

⁹⁸ ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 110, 111. VÁRADY (1969, p. 320) says of the mentioned western Roman embassy that it was *a delegation for reconciliation* which is not entirely suitable characterization because there was no break in relations between two states at that point.

⁹⁹ ŠAŠEL 1992, p. 643.

¹⁰⁰ *Prisc.*, fr 3, p. 199, 8- 10. Cf. ŠAŠEL KOS 1994, 110; VÁRADY 1969, pp. 315, 319.

¹⁰¹ ZECCHINI 1983, p. 263.

ern Roman envoys really came to the court of Attila. The conduct of Theodosius II after Attila had decided to bring the whole matter out on the open by demanding that Iusta Grata Honoria was to be handed over to him, shows clearly, together with some similar facts, that the rift between the two parts of the formally united Roman Empire was getting wider. Also, thanks to the Silvanus and Honoria affairs, the imperial government at Ravenna must have realized how insecure were the good relations with the Huns.

Abbreviations

JRS – Journal of Roman Studies

PLRE – The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: A. D. 395-527, Cambridge 1980

RE – Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft, Stuttgart 1893-1980

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