

## BYZANTINE DIPLOMACY AND THE LOMBARD-GEPIDIC WARS

The vicissitudes of Byzantine diplomacy in Pannonia and Dacia during the Lombard-Gepidic wars provide an opportunity for examining not only the implementation of Byzantine foreign policy but also some of the fundamental principles upon which that policy was founded<sup>1</sup>. This study will also in part be based on a comparison of the policies both advocated and pursued by the Emperors Justinian I and Justin II. The possibility for comparison is provided by the fact that their individual approaches to the Byzantine empire's relations with its northern neighbors have been previously analyzed as being substantially different.

Finally, the types of diplomatic and military initiatives undertaken during the Lombard-Gepidic wars established some of the essential parameters of Byzantine foreign policy wherever and whenever the Empire came into contact with "barbarians". The origins of these policies might be seen in the actions of Theodosius the Great and his response to the Gothic threat following the disastrous battle of Adrianople, but the systematic working out of those policies clearly came in the sixth century during the reign of Justinian I.

The long-range origins of the Lombard and Gepidic wars lie in the late fourth century<sup>2</sup>. A series of catastrophic military failures forced the Empire to depend to a dangerous degree for the defense of its Balkan provinces on federates (later called *symmachoi*) settled on Imperial territory to the south of the Danube as well as beyond the frontier in the former Roman provinces of Dacia and Pannonia<sup>3</sup>. Inadequate supplies of manpower and preoccupations with both internal and external problems in other regions forced the Empire in the fifth century not only to continue the use of the all-too-often treacherous federates but also to increase their dependence on them for the defense of the Balkan provinces. This was in spite of the fact that the federates in their defense of the assigned provinces were often as rapacious as the barbarians against whom they were theoretically defending these territories.

1. This study is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the Second Greek, Roman and Byzantine Conference (Highland Falls, N.Y.), March/April 1978.

2. On the military problems of the Byzantine Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries see, E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, vols. I and II, Amsterdam, 1968 (reprint of Paris/Burges, 1959); A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602*, vols. I and II, Oxford, 1973.

3. For the Germans, L. Schmidt, *Geschichte der deutschen Stamme: Die Ostgermanen*, 2nd ed., Munich, 1934.

Although the most serious source of federate duplicity was removed with the dispatch of the Ostrogoths into Italy against Odovacer in 488/489, the renewal of barbarian invasions some ten years later by the Slavs, Antes and Bulgars forced the empire, in the face of declining or depleted manpower reserves, to find new allies to defend the Danubian frontier. Some of the invaders themselves seem to have been recruited into the Imperial army, but necessity forced the Emperor Anastasius to resort to the, then, nearly traditional policy of establishing German and Hunnic federates to the south of the river and forging or renewing alliances with Germanic tribes north of the Danube/Sava line<sup>4</sup>.

Here we can see the beginnings of the, later much more clearly defined, program of playing one group of barbarians against another in an effort to curb the raiding potential of both, of shifting support from one ally to the other while simultaneously retaining an alliance with both parties, and of compensating the losers by settling them on Imperial territory if they were too badly damaged for any other external use. Also the settlement of the barbarians on Imperial territory clearly pointed out the dangers inherent in at least part of these policies. No matter how firm the sworn oaths nor lavish the subsidies, it was impossible to trust that these allies, whether within or outside the frontier, would not continue to plunder the neighboring Roman population<sup>5</sup>. In addition the barbarians were useless as settlers, and they nearly immediately proceeded to harass the local population. Similar problems and solutions were to emerge during the reign of Justinian I as the result of the fluctuating but generally hostile relations with the Gepids and the ensuing Lombard involvement in those relations.

Following the disintegration of the Hunnic empire, the Gepids were found settled in the former Roman province of Dacia as well as in the area between the Theiss and the Danube where they seem to have lived under the Huns. After the battle of the Nedao (c. 454) the Gepids were recognized along with the Ostrogoths as federates of the Empire<sup>6</sup>. They claimed in the sixth century a long standing alliance with the Byzantines which, it seems, went back to this settlement (c. 454/5). The exact character of the *foedus* between the Romans

4. On the policies of the Emperor Anastasius see, Carmelo Capizzi, *L'Imperatore Anastasio I (491-518)*, Roma, 1969, p. 157-173.

5. The best study of Byzantine diplomacy with the barbarian tribes remains, D. Obolensky, "The Principles and Methods of Byzantine Diplomacy", *Actes du XIIe congres internationale d'etudes byzantines*, vol. I, Belgrade, 1964, p. 43-61; see also D.A. Miller, "Byzantine Treaties and Treatymaking 500-1025 A.D.", *Byzantinoslavica*, vol. XXXII (1971), p. 57-76.

6. Jordanes, *Getica*, ed. Th. Mommsen, *M.G.H., A.A.*, vol. V, Berlin, 1882, sects. 263-264.

and the Gepids and the continuity of the federate status of the Gepids is slightly unclear, though it seems generally similar to other better known contemporary federate treaties. The first significant information with regard to the Gepids that at least indirectly affected the Empire occurred in the late 480's. As a consequence of the Ostrogothic wars, the Imperial administration in the north-west Balkans became considerably disorganized. Stepping into the resulting anarchy, the Gepids extended their territory to the west of the Danube to include most of Pannonia secunda and the city of Sirmium. The occupation occurred prior to Zeno's invitation to Theodoric to assume the administration of Italy. For it is in the province of lower Pannonia that the Gepids resisted the advance toward Italy of the Ostrogoths under Theodoric<sup>7</sup>.

The Gepids might have been allies of Odovacer, the administrator of Italy. But it seems more likely that they would have been defending this territory which had recently been Ostrogothic, but was now Gepidic, for fear that the Ostrogoths would seize this strategic area at the confluence of the Danube, Drava and Sava rivers. Though the Ostrogoths were apparently bent solely on reaching Italy, they forced the Gepids to do battle for Sirmium which was a vital position on the Imperial highway from Moesia to the west. The Gepids lost Sirmium and their king Thraustila, during their unsuccessful resistance to the advance of the Ostrogoths<sup>8</sup>. But shortly thereafter they recovered Sirmium and reestablished their previous control of much of Pannonia secunda until Theodoric had consolidated his position in the diocese of Italy<sup>9</sup>.

Taking advantage of the Byzantine involvement in a war with Persia and of the alleged hostile intentions of King Thrasaric, the erstwhile Gepidic ally of the Romans, Theodoric organized an expeditionary force under count Pitzia against the Gepids in 504<sup>10</sup>. Count Pitzia easily chased Thrasaric's followers from the right bank of the Danube and annexed Pannonia secunda and the city of Sirmium, the most important fortress in the central Danubian region<sup>11</sup>. The Ostrogoths had previously secured a dominant influence in mucq

7. Anonymus Valesianus, *pars posterior*, ed. Th. Mommsen, *M.G.H., A.A.*, vol. IX, Berlin, 1892, sect. 49; Jordanes, *Getica*, sec. 292; Ennodius, *Panegyricus dictus Theoderico regi*, ed. M.G. Vogel, *M.G.H., A.A.*, v. VII, Berlin, 1885, sect. 60.

8. Ennodius, *Panegyricus...*, sects. 28-35; see also C. Diclescu, *Die Gepiden*, Leipzig, 1923, p. 106-110.

9. The reconquest of Sirmium by the Gepids can be assumed since in 504, the Ostrogoths had to take the city from them again. See below for details.

10. For the situation of the Byzantine Empire see, E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas Empire*, vol. II, p. 93-101.

11. For the events of 504-505 see, Ennodius, *Panegyricus...*, sects. 60-69; Marcellinus comitis, *Chronicon*, ed. Th. Mommsen, *M.G.H., A.A.*, vol. XI, Berlin, 1894, ad. a. 505; Jordanes, *Getica*, sects. 300-301; Cassiodorus, *Variae*, ed. Th. Mommsen, *M.G.H., A.A.*, vol.

of western Illyricum before these events, but Theodoric realized the strategic necessity of seizing Pannonia secunda and especially Sirmium in order to assure the security of his eastern frontier in the Balkans. Though the political rights of Theodoric were somewhat obscure, the fluctuations in the jurisdiction over Illyricum between Rome/Ravenna and Constantinople had alternately placed Sirmium in the eastern and western spheres. In addition, the Gepidic occupation in the latter half of the 5th century had made any quibblings over jurisdiction moot at least for the time being.

For the empire, the most serious immediate consequence of the war was the establishment of Mundus, the Gepidic ally of the Ostrogoths and the nephew or cousin of King Thrasaric, in the province of Moesia prima along with a band of detribalized adventurers. A truce with Persia in 505 freed substantial Byzantine forces for service in the Balkans. The Emperor Anastasius was not willing to tolerate the intrusion of Theodoric in Illyricum — particularly as the latter's ally or client Mundus was rampaging through the Dacian diocese, all apparently the result of the Ostrogothic conquests in Pannonia secunda; further the Emperor suspected collusion between Theodoric and Mundus in the latter's raids on Imperial territory. With a force of ten thousand men, mostly Bulgarian federates, Sabinian, the magister militum per Illyricum, undertook a campaign to drive Mundus out of Moesia and the diocese of Dacia. This imperial effort drew in the Ostrogoths<sup>12</sup>.

Because he was a client of the Ostrogoths, Mundus requested that count Pitzia give him aid to resist the Roman army. The count honored the Ostrogothic commitments to their ally and sent 2500 men from Pannonia II to join Mundus in Moesia prima. Pitzia himself seems to have lead these reinforcements which indicates that Emperor Anastasius was not far wrong in his suspicions of Ostrogothic involvement. If the Ostrogoths had not previously compounded with Mundus, they certainly were now in the midst of a war with the Imperial army. The Ostrogoths and the Romans encountered each other on the Morava. In the ensuing battle, the forces under count Pitzia virtually annihilated their opponents; the magister Sabinian and small groups saved themselves only by precipitous flight.

Theodoric, the eternal opportunist, had not wished for an open war with the Empire, only a strategic advance in an isolated corner of the northern Balkans well away from the locus of Byzantine power, while the Romans were preoccupied elsewhere. Though the Ostrogoths had attacked a federated state of the Empire, Theodoric did not intend to become involved in a war with the

XII, Berlin, 1894, VIII, 10, 4; C. Diclescu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 110-112; 114-115.

12. Marcellinus comitis, *Chronicon*, ad. a. 505; Ennodius, *Panegyricus...*, sects. 60-69.

Romans. Consequently he recalled Pitzia from the diocese of Dacia but he had no intention of going the whole way to appease the Emperor by evacuating Pannonia secunda or Sirmium<sup>13</sup>. Though the conflict remained unsettled, the Emperor Anastasius did not seek to renew open combat; nor did he attempt to incite his Gepidic federates against Theodoric's occupation forces but rather seems to have hoped to strike at the Ostrogoths indirectly. The Ostrogoths for their part were not discomforted by the ensuing Byzantine alliance with the Franks. By sending an embassy to Constantinople in 506/7, Theodoric sought to secure peace; the Ostrogoths offered their own terms and made promises not to renew hostilities<sup>14</sup>. The effort went without formal success. Despite the fact that peace was not formally concluded, until 510, the frontier war in Illyricum was not revived directly by the Empire for nearly thirty years.

The Gepids might have proven a broken reed in the defense of the western frontier against the Ostrogoths and in the interests of the Empire but they were not prepared to see Sirmium pass permanently from their hands. After the death of Theodoric in 526 but before 535, the Gepids made an abortive attempt to retake Sirmium<sup>15</sup>. In this effort they seem to have been encouraged by the Empire which had never lost its own interest in restoring its position on the central Danube. The pivot of any defensive line in the western Balkans was Sirmium. Although the ideal solution would have been possession of the city, the east Romans do not seem to have aimed at immediate control of this vital region; no large force of praesental or diocesan troops are recorded as being present in northeast Illyricum during the period of 527 or 528. The indirect engagement with the Ostrogoths was probably intended to test their control of the frontier after the death of Theodoric. If the Herulians and the Gepids should have been successful then the permanent possession of Sirmium might have passed to the Empire. If the Gepids had taken Sirmium, the Byzantines would not have benefited directly, but the Goths were then a more dangerous threat to Imperial security, than either the Gepids or the Herulians.

During most of the sixth century, the Gepids were at least informally allies of the Empire. In the Ostrogothic-Gepidic war after the death of Theodoric, there is, thus, reason to believe that the Byzantines had some hand in inducing the Gepids to make the effort at Sirmium. For one reason the Herulians, who were federates of the Empire, fought as allies of the Gepids against the Ostrogoths<sup>16</sup>. These Herulians were the remnants of the tribe which had in the

13. Cassiodorus, *Variae*, III, 23, 24.

14. Carmelo Capizzi, *L'Imperatore Anastasio I*, p. 167, 170.

15. For a general account of these events see, C. Diclescu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 116-117.

16. The Gepids became federates at the time of their settlement on Roman territory by the Emperor Anastasius but lost that status due to their pillaging of the local population. Theri

late 5th century been shattered by the Lombards in the former territory of the Rugians north of the Danube. Around 512 following a tenuous existence among the Gepids, the Herulians had been settled within the Byzantine frontier by the Emperor Anastasius in the diocese of Dacia<sup>17</sup>.

After a sometimes dubious tenure as federates, the Herulians were officially converted to Christianity after the baptism of their King Grepes in early 528<sup>18</sup>. Simultaneously they were granted an enlarged subsidy to strengthen their ties as federates and given the territory around Bassiana on the right bank of the Sava, the best land in the region of Singidunum. This area of Moesia prima was of great strategic importance on the Illyrian frontier since Sirmium had been lost and it was also near the Ostrogoths and the Gepids<sup>19</sup>.

Because of Mundus who had earlier caused the war between Theodoric and Anastasius which had been officially concluded in 510, the Herulians were involved in the renewal of the struggle between the Gepids and the Ostrogoths. About this time, the adventurer Mundus and his motley band of followers were found settled near or among the Herulians. The circumstances under which Mundus came to be among the Herulians who were federates of the Empire are obscure. Apparently some sort of reconciliation or amnesty had made it possible for Mundus to peacefully enter Roman territory, possibly after the treaty of 510. While it is possible that these events occurred when the Herulians were still largely in Dacia ripensis (i.e. before 528) it seems more likely that Mundus made his suggestion after the Herulians had received the land around Bassiana and south of Singidunum in Moesia superior. The area of Moesia prima was a much more reasonable base for operations against the Ostrogoths entrenched in Pannonia secunda and that location made cooperation with the Gepids more feasible. The war definitely took place before Mundus entered Imperial service and became magister in 529 as there is no indication that he lead the Herulians as an Imperial officer. Therefore, it appears that this third Ostrogothic-Gepidic war over Sirmium occurred in 527/528 about the time of the conversion of the Herulians and before Mundus joined the east Roman army. The participation of the Herulians and the whole of the events related to the war imply the instigation if not planning of the Empire

federate status seems to have been restored by Justinian; see, Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, ed. and trans. H. B. Dewing, Cambridge, 1919, VI, 14, 33-34.

17. Cassiodorus, *Variae*, IV, 2, 45; Marcellinus comitis, *Chronicon*, ad. a. 512; L. Schmidt, *Die Ostgermanen*, p. 551-553.

18. John Malalas, *Chronicle of John Malalas, Books VIII-XVIII*, ed. and trans. M. Spinka and G. Downey, Chicago, 1940, p. 135; Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, Leipzig, 1883, a. 6020, p. 174.

19. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 33, 13.

in this war. Now disillusioned with the Ostrogoths, Mundus suggested that the Herulians join the Gepids in an effort to recover Sirmium. With the tacit consent of Justinian, the Herulians assisted the Gepids in their abortive effort. The attack on Sirmium failed when the Ostrogothic general Vitigis defeated the Gepids and Herulians, and drove them across the Sava. The Ostrogoths pursued the fugitives into Moesia prima where they sacked the city of Gratiana. At the same time the Gepidic and Herulian fugitives themselves took their own revenge for their defeat by pillaging the local Roman population who had already been preyed upon during the Slavic and Bulgar raids in Illyricum<sup>20</sup>.

No open conflict between the Romans and the Ostrogoths ensued. The Ostrogothic regent Amalasuntha quickly withdrew Vitiges and his forces from Byzantine territory as she had no wish to provoke a war with the Empire<sup>21</sup>. Justinian was preoccupied by the perennial war with Persia and was prepared to wait for his retaliation. At the same time the Emperor Justinian was becoming increasingly interested in the recovery of all of the Ostrogothic inheritance which in the case of Illyricum would round out and rationalize the defensive system in the Balkans by making possible the reestablishment of the Danube/Sava line if the pivot at Sirmium was recovered. Subsequently the recovery of Sirmium became a dominant theme in east Roman relations with the barbarians on the central Danubian region.

Also as a result of the brief Ostrogothic war, the Gepidic chieftain Mundus entered the Imperial service, to be appointed *magister militum* of Illyria in 529<sup>22</sup>. Justinian apparently held no grudge against Mundus for the failure in Pannonia secunda or for the subsequent plundering of Roman citizens. Not only was Mundus to prove himself an effective general, but his personal ties with the king of the Gepids made his service doubly valuable as his presence had a favorable influence on the relations of the East Romans and the Gepids.

However, despite these long term and immediate ties, the seeds of future hostilities had been laid between the Gepids and the Empire. The Gepids had never given up their determination to recover Sirmium, a plan in which they had recently been encouraged by the Empire. The Byzantines, who had sought to manipulate the Gepids in the recent affair with the Ostrogoths over Sirmium for their own benefit, also were determined to gain control of Sirmium which was the pivotal point of the Danubian-Sava defensive line. With both sides set on gaining the same object, hostilities were inevitable. The general situation

20. E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas Empire*, vol. II, p. 307-308; these events are alluded to by Procopius (*Bellum gothicum*, V, 3, 15-16) but I hope to deal with this obscure precursor of the Byzantine - Ostrogothic war in a forth-coming article.

21. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, V, 3, 15-30.

22. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, a. 6032.

was exacerbated by the renewed series of massive Slavic and Bulgar raids of the 530's, 540's and 550's.

The Slavic and Bulgarian raids, which began again in the 520's on a serious scale, provide the persistently disturbing background for the developing relations between the Byzantines and the Germans in the central Danubian region<sup>23</sup>. Eventually, the generally deteriorating situation will lead the Empire to take the dangerous decision of seeking a final solution of the Gepidic problem, particularly as related to their rivalry for the control of Sirmium. In the interim, the necessities of the war in Italy, with its constant demands upon the increasingly scarce resources of manpower and the accompanying weakening of the Balkan defenses, meant that the Empire needed federates, both to defend the frontier against other non-federated barbarians and to supply contingents for the Gothic wars. The demands made by the Imperial army for the Italian war required the Empire to attempt to secure soldiers wherever they could, including among the Gepids as well as the other Germanic tribes<sup>24</sup>.

Against the background of threatening conditions in the Balkans, the Empire in 535 opened a new war against the Ostrogoths in Dalmatia and Sicily. Justinian now chose to undertake the earlier deferred war against the Ostrogoths. In the region of lower Pannonia a detachment of the Imperial army from Illyricum took Sirmium which it held for approximately one year<sup>25</sup>. Though the occupation was brief and temporary it set off a vortex of hostility between the Gepids and Byzantines that was to have disastrous consequences for both during the next thirty years.

The following year, 536, brought several important developments in the relations of the Empire and the Gepids: first, the Byzantines were unable to adequately garrison Sirmium due to the increasing violence of the war with the Goths in Dalmatia; second, this circumstance made it possible for the Gepids to take control of the city (sometime in late summer or early autumn). We are not apprized in the sources of the conditions under which the transfer occurred. But whether the city fell to the Gepids by assault or by a Roman withdrawal, the important fact for the Empire was that the permanent possession of this vital position in the Balkan defensive system had eluded them once again. Finally in the events related to 536, Mundus, magister militum per Illyrium, died defending Dalmatia against an Ostrogothic counterattack<sup>26</sup>. Mundus had been a competent and loyal soldier and a potentially important link between the Gepids and the Byzantines. Because he was an effective commander

23. E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas Empire*, vol. II, p. 305-306.

24. J. Teall, "The Barbarians on Justinian's Armies", *Speculum*, XL (1965), p. 294-322.

25. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 33, 8.

26. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, V, 7, 6-8.



but also because he was a Gepid, his presence as *magister militum* seems to have deterred Gepidic intrusions into the Balkans. The sum of this year's events contributed significantly to the gradually worsening relations between them until the collapse of the Gepidic nation was controlled by the Gepids, but the Byzantines were determined that the city should be theirs both by right and necessity.

Following the insulting refusal of the Gepids to return the city on the request of Justinian and the intensification of Gepidic raids in the diocese of Dacia, which was now readily accessible to the Gepids, the immediate reaction of the Emperor was to declare an end to the federate treaty with the Gepids, which has existed since the 5th century, and to suspend their subsidies<sup>27</sup>. The military response of the Empire was limited by its commitments in Italy and elsewhere; however, a number of cities to the east and south of Sirmium were reinforced, new forts were constructed in the same region and some Herulians were settled as federates in the countryside to the south of the Sirmium<sup>28</sup>. A related but later response was ultimately to be much more ominous for the Gepids. The Emperor Justinian began to involve the Lombards of Upper Pannonia, in his diplomatic and military countermeasures against the Gepids<sup>29</sup>.

In these particular circumstances the Lombards responded by remaining neutral in the struggle of the Empire against the Ostrogoths. The Gepids allied themselves with the Franks who in 539 joined the Ostrogoths against the Romans in Italy<sup>30</sup>. Further, the Gepids captured large tracts in Moesia superior and Dacia ripensis while raiding other parts of eastern Illyricum until interrupted by the *magister* Kalluk. The results were disastrous for the Imperial army; the Roman commander was killed and most of his army annihilated<sup>31</sup>.

Though the continuing raids of the Gepids were vexing and the recent military defeat by them humiliating, the sudden renewal of Bulgar attacks in Thrace and Illyricum prevented any effective military response to the Gepids. On the other hand, the countermeasures against the Bulgars were no more effective. Attempting to relieve the pressure in, at least, one direction, the now customary necessities forced the Emperor to resort to direct diplomacy in an

27. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 33, 8-9; C. Diclescu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 125.

28. See Procopius, *De aedificis*, IV, 5, 1-11, for the fortifications at and around Singidunum, which were constructed or repaired during this period.

29. *Origo gentis Langobardorum*, ed. M.G. Waitz, *M.G.H. Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum et italicarum Saec. VI-IX*, Berlin 1878, p. 4; Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardicarum*, *M.G.H. Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum...*, I, 20-21.

30. E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas Empire*, vol. II, p. 309; C. Diclescu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 129.

31. Marcellinus Comitis, *Chronicon*, ad. a. 539.

effort to close the northern frontier to Gepidic raids. Sometime in 539/540 a treaty was concluded between the two sides which renewed the recently abrogated federate treaty, restored the payment of subsidies to the Gepids, and sanctioned the *de facto* surrender of certain territories south and west of Sirmium to the Gepids<sup>32</sup>. The foedus was not an all together satisfactory solution for the Empire but the best that could have been expected under the circumstances. In addition, the temporary remission in trans-Danubian raids by the Bulgars and Slavs allowed the Empire to take certain administrative measures such as restoring some of the frontier fortifications necessary for the defense of the Balkan provinces.

In his continuing effort to induce the Lombards to aid the Empire against the Gepids, with whom the Lombards had apparently been at peace since their defeat of the Herulians, the Emperor Justinian confirmed the Lombards in their control of Pannonia prima and Valeria, and finally offered them a substantial subsidy; all of this seems to have occurred in 545/546<sup>33</sup>. No real loss of territory was incurred in contrast with the Roman-Gepid treaty of 539/40. The formal establishment of the Lombards in Pannonia as allies of the Empire was a serious check to Gepidic expansion and a potential deterrent to their growing military power.

The classical strategy of setting one barbarian tribe to check another can once again be seen in Justinian's negotiations and the subsequent Roman treaty with the Lombards. Though the results of wars, particularly barbarian wars, were uncertain and the allies themselves fickle, the potential results of Lombard-Gepidic rivalry might lessen the threat of both to Roman territory and lead to the recovery of Sirmium, a goal which was on the minds of the leaders of the Empire since the Ostrogothic reconquest earlier in the century.

Whether due to Justinian's incitement or not, the latent hostility between the Lombards and the Gepids soon flared into full scale war in 549<sup>34</sup>. During the ensuing conflict, the patterns of relations with the Germanic federates which we have already seen in operation, will be clearly visible as the Empire used its full panoply of diplomatic and military means (though these were limited) in order to extract the greatest possibly immediate advantages from the series of Lombard and Gepidic wars.

The immediate origins of the war lay in the fact that the two kings were usurpers whose legitimate rivals had been driven to seek refuge and aid in the

32. C. Diclescu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 130-131.

33. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 33, 10.

34. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 34, 1; for the date see E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas Empire*; vol. II, p. 530; for the whole of the wars see C. Diclescu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 137-163 and P. Lakatos, *Quellenbuch zur Geschichte der Gepiden*, Szeged, 1973.

opposite camp. The resulting animosities which built on the latent hostilities between the two tribes produced an environment favorable to the outbreak of the war. Because of their military inferiority, the Lombards were the first to send an embassy to Constantinople to ask for military assistance. When the Gepids learned of this effort, they also sent an embassy to Byzantium to make a similar request<sup>35</sup>.

Justinian heard the Lombards first. They emphasized the long-standing lack of good faith on the part of the Gepids who were allies of the Empire but who persistently broke their agreements by such actions as taking and holding Sirmium. The Lombards asked the Emperor to reflect on the Gepids' behavior and to aid the Lombards; such assistance would benefit both the Lombards and the Romans. In addition being of the same religion the two were natural allies while the Gepids were Arians<sup>36</sup>.

The Gepidic envoys for their part accused the Lombards of aggression and refusing to settle their dispute by arbitration; they also referred to their superior numbers and the long-standing alliance with the Romans (in contrast to the recent Lombard alliance). Finally they indirectly recognized the charge of bad faith by promising to be steadfast allies if they received Roman aid. Either because of insensitivity or arrogance, the Gepids undermined their position by a sophistic justification for their having taken and having continued to hold Sirmium and Dacia ripensis as being in the spirit of their alliance with the Romans<sup>37</sup>. The Emperor certainly did not appreciate the gratuitous remarks of the Gepids.

After long deliberations, Justinian decided to reject the Gepidic request and to conclude a full alliance with the Lombards<sup>38</sup>. The Lombards were weaker than the Gepids and their defeat would only make the Gepidic problem worse. Also as the weaker party, the Lombards would possibly be more tractable than the Gepids had been. Finally, Justinian seems to have hoped that the combined efforts of the Lombards and Romans could break the enormous power of the Gepids on the Danube. If not, the war between the two German tribes would further intensify their hatred of each other and most likely weaken both of them militarily. In either case the Empire might be able to recover Sirmium. The size of the Byzantine expeditionary force seems to indicate that Justinian hoped to seriously weaken the Gepids and thus regain Sirmium by direct military measures. Justinian's response to the end of the war indicates a similar intention.

35. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 34, 2-4.

36. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 34, 6-24.

37. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 34, 25-39.

38. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 34, 40.

In this instance, that the Byzantines certainly did not underestimate the power of the Gepids can be seen in the size of the force which Justinian dispatched to assist the Lombards. The ultimate goal of the expedition was Italy which did increase the size of the army but the magnitude of the commitment is indicative of the importance which Justinian attached to the effort in the Pannonias<sup>39</sup>. The force came to total 15,000 men including 1,500 Herulians and 3,500 other allies. This was the largest force the Byzantines ever used against the northern barbarians in the sixth century at least before the reign of Maurice and should be compared with the size of other contemporary field armies that ranged from 10-25,000 men<sup>40</sup>. The commitment of the Byzantines was significant. It was not lost on the Gepids who realized the danger of their position after this expeditionary force destroyed a contingent of 3000 Herulian allies of the Gepids somewhere south of the Danube<sup>41</sup>. The full importance of this defeat was reinforced when the Gepids learned simultaneously that the Roman force was approaching their immediate territory. The result was not what Justinian had hoped for; Thorisin, king of the Gepids, opened negotiations with Audoin, king of the Lombards and quickly arranged a truce with the Lombards much to the disgruntlement of the Emperor<sup>42</sup>. For their part neither the Lombards or the Gepids seem to have engaged in any significant military actions during this brief campaign.

With the reconciliation of the barbarians, the Imperial expeditionary force could not risk a further advance nor could it retreat for fear of leaving the Balkans open to Gepidic raids. As a result the army halted and sought instructions from Justinian<sup>43</sup>. Unfortunately the sources do not inform us of the Emperor's instructions, but later events seem to indicate that a substantial part proceeded to Italy.

The peace between the Lombards and the Gepids did not last long. In the spring of 550 the war was renewed. Though the immediate causes are unknown, the hostility of the two was by now too entrenched to be solved by negotiations. The war was, however, a farce. The two armies approached each other secretly and then simultaneously panicked and fled the field without making contact, leaving the two kings and their bodyguards to arrange the affair.

39. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 24, 41.

40. Compare to the Vandalic expedition of 533 where E. Stein (p. 312) estimates 18,000 men under Belisarius.

41. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 34, 44-45; for the division of the Herulians c. 545 and their consequent presence on both sides see Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VI, 14, 37-42; 15, 27-36.

42. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 34, 45.

43. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VII, 34, 46.

Without their armies, Thorisin, king of the Gepids, and Audoin, king of the Lombards, concluded a two years truce<sup>44</sup>.

The truce was used by both Gepids and Lombards to prepare for the next round in a spiraling intensification of the conflict. The Gepids secured the aid of the Kutrigurs on the Azov steppe but their help proved an embarrassment. The Kutrigurs under Chinialus arrived too early for the war with the Lombards. This mistake was remedied by sending the Kutrigurs to raid Byzantine territories in Illyricum and Thrace. The successful diplomatic efforts of the Empire in forcing a withdrawal by the Kutrigurs are not a part of this article but the total effect of this latest Gepidic outrage did not improve their relations with the Empire<sup>45</sup>. At the same time, the Lombards had been mending their diplomatic fences with the Justinian by promising to send men to aid in the war in Italy. In the final preparations for war, the Gepids sought to intimidate the Emperor into concluding an alliance with them by demonstrating their ability to control the access of the Slavs to the Balkan provinces of the Empire.

The results were in part what the Gepids had hoped for; the Emperor Justinian decided not to refuse the Gepid's repeated requests for a renewal of the alliance between them<sup>46</sup>. However, only several weeks later Justinian responded favorably to a Lombard plea for aid by sending a military expedition to assist them rather than the Gepids. His formal reason was that the Gepids had apparently ferried some more Slavs across the Danube, subsequent to the renewal of their *foedus* with the Empire. As such a action was a violation of the treaty, the Emperor felt able explicitly to help the Lombards. More importantly the Lombard request came on the eve of the renewal of the Gothic war. Justinian hoped that the Lombards would contribute a substantial contingent to reinforce the Roman army in Italy. The expeditionary force to aid the Lombards was organized and sent north under Justin and Justinian, sons of Germanus, and Amalfrid (among others)<sup>47</sup>.

Of the expedition only a detachment under Amalfrid reached the Lombards. The main part of the expedition reached Ulpiana where it was ordered to halt and to suppress civil strife provoked by the religious dispute over the three chapters. Amalfrid's force did participate in the bloody Lombard victory over the Gepids in May/June 552<sup>48</sup>.

On the surface it appeared as if the Emperor had deliberately withheld

44. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VIII, 18, 1-11.

45. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VIII, 18, 12-24; 19, 6-22.

46. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VIII, 25, 1-6.

47. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VIII, 25, 11.

48. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VIII, 25, 14-15.

aid from the Lombards, thus preventing a complete Lombard victory. At least that is what Audoin seems to have concluded. He sent envoys to Constantinople to announce his victory but also to reproach the Emperor for sending insufficient military aid, particularly in the light of the several thousand Lombards whom Audoin had already sent to join Narses in Italy<sup>49</sup>. At approximately the same time, the Gepids sent envoys to Justinian to ask for peace. The Emperor was more than ready to oblige.

Though the Empire's direct involvement in the war had been minimal, the weakened condition of both sides made it possible for Justinian to play the role of mediator in the treaty negotiations (while at the same time being a party to the treaties). Thus the Empire was able to carry off the lion's share of the rewards of Justinian's diplomacy. The Gepids were forced to give up the parts of Dacia ripensis and Upper Moesia which they had received in 539/540. Though they refused to concede Sirmium, the Gepids seem to have had their alliance with the Empire reaffirmed. The Lombards remained allies, as later events will indicate. Of greater benefit for the Empire, the Lombards and Gepids were both weakened to such an extent by the war that their respective military potentials were nearly in balance. The subsequent relations of the Empire with the Germans on the central Danube were not very good but the militarily exhausted Germans remained quiet and did not trouble the Balkan provinces for the rest of the reign of Justinian<sup>50</sup>.

The last years of Justinian's reign were blighted by the continued rampages of the Slavs and Bulgars in the European provinces. At the same time, Justinian seems to have put aside, at least for his own life time, the Imperial intention of recovering Sirmium—the idea did not wither and was to be revived by Justin II. Justin II was to recover Sirmium and the final solution of the Gepidic problem was to be realized though with unexpected consequences.

A perpetual peace, which lasted twelve years, did not diminish the rivalry between the Lombards and the Gepids. For reasons of royal family relations, which are not directly pertinent to this analysis, the hostilities between the two tribes were renewed in 565<sup>51</sup>. In the first round the Lombards successfully repulsed a Gepidic attack. Kunimund, the new king of the Gepids, immediately sent envoys to Constantinople to request Byzantine military aid against the now victorious Lombards. These requests were accompanied by gifts to the Emperor and by the greatest temptation that the Gepids could offer to Justin II

49. Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VIII, 25, 15.

50. E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas Empire*, vol. II, p. 534; Procopius, *Bellum gothicum*, VIII, 27, 21.

51. For the latter phases of the war see E. Stein, *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Reiches*, Stuttgart, 1919; and K. Groh, *Geschichte des oströmischen Kaisers Justin II nebst den Quellen*, Leipzig, 1889.

— a promise to return Sirmium. The latter offer was too much to be ignored. The Emperor accepted the gifts and the promises, and ordered curopalates Baduarius, with troops from Scythia minor and Moesia secunda to aid the Gepids. The intervention of Imperial forces was decisive; in the second round of this war, the Gepids defeated the Lombards. The Byzantine expedition secured a rich haul of booty from the campaign, (c. 566) but Kunimund refused to turn over Sirmium as promised which seriously effected Byzantine responses in the last phase of the war<sup>52</sup>.

Relations between the Lombards and Gepids had hardly been more than those of live and let live even during the twelve years of peace, but the refusal of Kunimund to solve the still outstanding marital problems with Alboin before the war began and the humiliating defeat which the Lombards had just suffered transformed their intermittent hostilities into irreconcilable hatred. Both states seemed set on annihilating the other and this turn of events, a state of affairs which was most unusual among the Germanic tribes, came suddenly and without significant warning. The Byzantines certainly do not seem to have anticipated or even perceived this change of direction. The Empire followed its traditional approach to the barbarians without being aware of the potential long term consequences of the destruction of either group; still their respective presences and the continuing problems created by both sides could not have seemed wholly salutatory for the Empire. Though Imperial policies toward the northern barbarians were often short-sighted, it would have been difficult for any Imperial official to have seen the ominous potential of their own erstwhile Avar allies, or to have perceived that more was occurring than the elimination of another barbarian threat. An incredible instability was going to be introduced into the region north of the Danube/Sava line as a result of this final round in the Lombard-Gepidic wars.

The most important external element that made all of this possible was the steady advance of the Avars from the east, across the steppe of southern Russia. The Avars had been allies of the Empire since 558, after which they had solved some of the immediate problems of the Byzantine position in the Balkans by destroying the Bulgar confederacy and the Antes on the steppe between the Don and the Danube. As a result of their advance to the west, the Avars in the early 560's were settled in the area immediately north of the Danube and were demanding (562), in addition to the usual subsidy, land upon

52. Theophylactos Simocattes, *Historiarum*, ed. I. Bekker, *Corpus Scriptorum historiae byzantinae*, Bonn, 1834, VI, 10, p. 260-262; C. Diclescu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 153; L. Schmidt, *Die Ostgermanen*, p. 583; E. Stein, *Studien zur Geschichte...*, p. 8; all of these clarify the confused account of Paulus Diaconus, *Historia langobardarum*, M.G.H., *Scriptores rerum langobardicarum*, bk. 1, ch. 27.

which to settle. Justinian was most wary of settling barbarians within the immediate effective frontiers of the Empire; therefore he offered the Avars the area of Slovakia where the Herulians had once resided, i.e. a relatively small territory north of the Lombards and Gepids from which the Avars could have moved only with difficulty. The Avar khagan Bayan was not about to play into the hands of the Emperor. He refused the offer and settled his followers temporarily in Bessarabia and Moldavia. By his offer to Bayan, the Emperor had apparently intended not only to remove these dubious allies from the immediate frontier of the Empire but also to introduce another element into the Pannonian /Dacian environment in order to threaten the Lombards and Gepids should either of them become intractable again<sup>53</sup>.

After the disaster of 566, Audoin, king of the Lombards, prepared to renew the war as soon as his forces had recovered and he had secured allies for the war. The Lombard king was determined to destroy the Gepids, but he recognized that he did not have sufficient strength on his own. He would need his own allies in order to defeat the Gepids now that they were allied with the Romans. Audoin, therefore, turned to the Avars who were potentially hostile to both the Gepids and the Romans. The terms of alliance that Audoin was able to secure from the Khagan of the Avars, were extremely expensive, but the Lombards desperately needed Avar intervention and were willing to pay the price the Khagan demanded<sup>54</sup>.

For their part, the Gepids learned very late of the progress of the Lombard diplomacy but still sent envoys to Constantinople to seek military aid. They again held out the promise of Sirmium but their dishonest dealings following the previous agreement to surrender the city were not lost on the Emperor Justin II. He did agree to aid the Gepids, but in this, he was deliberately deceptive. He dismissed the Gepidic envoys with vague statements about gathering the dispersed Imperial forces in the Balkans and dispatching them as soon as possible. In the meantime Audoin became uneasy about the alliance which he had concluded with the Avars. Reflection seemed to indicate that the situation would be improved if the Romans were not involved at all. Due to existing circumstance the Lombards could not expect aid from the Empire but they did seek Roman neutrality. The Lombard's needs fit conveniently into Justin II's plans. He had no intention of being made a fool, a second time by Kunimund. Justin II promised the Lombards that he would remain neutral

53. On the Avars see A. Kollautz and H. Miyakawa, *Geschichte und Kultur eines völkerwanderungszeitlichen Nomadenvolkes. Die Jou-Jan der Mongolei und die Awaren in Mitteleuropa*, I. *Die Geschichte*, Klagenfurt, 1970, p. 37-76.

54. Menander protector, *Fragmenta*, ed. C. de Boor, *Excerpta de legationibus*, Leipzig, 1903, frgs. 24 and 25; C. Dicuiescu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 157-8.



as he already seems to have intended<sup>55</sup>.

The Emperor appeared to be satisfied to permit the Lombards and Gepids to tear each other apart with whatever other barbarian assistance they could gather, the intention being to recover at least Sirmium and whatever else might fall his way. As previously reflected in the abortive Avor negotiations of 565 which alienated the Avars the change of policy in the Danubian region was extremely significant. The Emperor had decided deliberately to remove the Empire from the maneuverings in Pannonia and Dacia and to let events develop by themselves without direct Imperial intervention. Though it could not have been known at the time, the immediate and long-range consequences of this premediated Imperial abstention were to be most serious.

During the war the Empire gained two things: Sirmium and its environs and the royal treasury of the Gepids. As promised to the Lombards, the Empire stayed out of the war, but the Gepids were unaware of this decision as the Emperor never informed them of his volte-face. Therefore, the Gepidic garrison at Sirmium surrendered the city to Imperial troops under Bonus as stipulated in the treaty, and joined their comrades in the field.

Due to a series of fatal tactical and strategic errors, the Gepids were completely defeated by the Lombards. The Gepidic kingdom was annihilated, and their territory east of the Danube fell to the Avors who did little real fighting in the war. The surviving Gepids fled in all directions but most of them were forced to accept Avaric rule as the terms of the Lombard-Avar treaty gave them the kingdom of the Gepids. Some Gepids held out in the mountains of eastern Dacia until 571 when they joined a small portion of the Gepids who had fled to Imperial territory in 567<sup>56</sup>.

The general consensus that the replacement of the Gepids by the Avars caused conditions to go from bad to worse in the area north of the Imperial frontier is largely borne out by the events in the immediate aftermath of the war. By defeating the Gepids and letting in the Avars, the Lombards soon found that they had introduced an overly powerful neighbor who threatened their own existence<sup>57</sup>. This set in motion a series of actions that eventually resulted in the Lombards seizing much of Byzantine Italy, an area which had only been recently secured by the Romans at a tremendous or even prohibitive cost following decades of war.

For their part the Byzantines had recovered Sirmium but they were not to have the respite needed to reconstitute their defenses in the western Balkans.

55. Menander protector, *Fragmenta*, frg. 25; C. Diclesu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 158; Paulus Diaconus, *Historia langobardarum*, ch. 27; E. Stein, *Studien...*, p. 89.

56. C. Diclesu, *Die Gepiden*, p. 160-164.

57. Paulus Diaconus, *Historia langobardarum*, bk. II, ch. 7.

The Avars immediately began to make pressing and insistent demands for subsidies and early on indicated their own interest in Sirmium<sup>58</sup>. Not that he was solely responsible for this turn of events; but the Emperor Justin II's deliberate withdrawal from the affairs of the Pannonia and Dacia in 566/67 were to have serious immediate repercussions.

The Avars emerged as the main threat to the Danubian frontier. Their potential for damage to the Imperial position and the Imperial provinces in the Balkans was to be all too quickly revealed. The policy of benign neglect pursued in this instance and the earlier disastrous treatment of the Avar envoys introduced an instability into Balkan affairs which the later reversal of policy by Tiberius and Maurice could repair only at considerable military cost and only after the Byzantine position in the Balkans had been perhaps fatally undermined by the Slavic and Avaric invasions. Though Meander praised the Emperor for his tough stand against the barbarians, i.e. Avars, Justin II did not have or would not use sufficient military force to make his aggressive, revisionist policies work particularly with the Avars who soon learned that they could act with impunity toward the Romans.

In conclusion, the basic principles which underlay Byzantine policies with regard to this question as well as to the continuum of Byzantine relations in the Balkans and the steppe until at least the middle of the eleventh century were established in this period largely by Justinian the First. These principles have, I believe, been demonstrated.

First, federates or *symmachoi* were settled either within the territory of the Empire or immediately outside the frontier with their primary responsibility being to defend their regions against other supposedly more dangerous barbarians (though we have seen that allied barbarians were often as rapacious as their unallied peers.) These *symmachoi* were granted subsidies on the theory of paying for services rendered but in actuality as bribes or tribute for the barbarians to remain reasonably tractable. Also the *symmachoi* were expected to provide contingents to be absorbed into the various Imperial expeditionary forces.

Second, the Emperor Justinian followed a policy of setting one group of barbarians against the other; whether one or both were allies of the Empire seems to have made little difference. The purpose seems to have been two-fold; to establish a dynamic equilibrium within which the Empire could hold the balance with minimal forces (an acute recognition of the limitations of direct intervention and the compelling commitments of Imperial military forces in other areas) and / or to induce or permit wars between the barbarians with the

58. Menander protector, *Fragmenta*, frgs. 26 and 27.

goal of weakening both sides, thus increasing the relative security of the Empire. At the same time the Romans remained diplomatically involved so as to be able to extract maximum benefits from both sides. A corollary of this point is that of avoiding military involvement beyond the frontiers except in the most compelling of situations.

These are the fundamental elements of Byzantine diplomacy in the reign of Justinian. With some elaboration but without considerably change, they are the principles formalized by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus in the tenth century. But before that, in the reign of Justinian's immediate successor there was an effort to revise certain important aspects of these parameters. The basic purpose remained the same—to secure the Imperial frontier in the Balkans at the Danube/Sava line and as much beyond as was feasible—but the implementation of these policies was completely changed. By a fatal error of failing to recognize the *de facto* limitations on Byzantine options, the Emperor Justin II undermined the Byzantine position in the Balkans which, though admittedly precarious, had still not completely collapsed. Justin II substituted a policy of belligerent aggressiveness, for Justinian's policy of conciliatory opportunism. While Justinian's perspective recognized the limitations of the Byzantine position, a position created by what have been called Justinian illusory conquests in the West and the wars with Persia, that of Justin II failed to take into account the extremely weak military position of the Empire in the Balkans. Justin II pursued policies similar to Justinian's in nearly as many directions without the reservoir for realism that marked Justinian's policies in the Balkans. The position which I take in comparing Justinian's and Justin's policies is not one of judging whether their ultimate goals were illusions or even dillusions, since they were both bound by an Imperial ideology that almost necessitated certain directions of emphasis, but rather comparing the implementation of these policies and the resulting effects.

In the long term the overcommitment of forces to east and west that left the Balkans defenses woefully undermanned would most likely have proven fatal. However, Justinian seems to have judged realistically these limitations and pursued a series of policies and decisions which recognized that major military forces were not going to be committed in the Balkans. Though the suffering and devastation was at times intense, Justinian had succeeded even to the end of his reign in preserving the essential military frontiers in the Balkans as well as an effective administrative presence in the region. There had been losses and there had been gains, but no irreversible disasters and largely because of a diplomacy that took maximum but not excessive advantage of the military potential of available forces. In particular the military demonstrations of

549 and 552 seem to have impressed the Germans as is indicated by their repeated requests for military aid.

Whether he was unwilling or unable to commit adequate forces to the defense of the Balkans, Justin II's policies in the Lombard-Gepidic wars and later with the Avars were exceedingly obtuse in the former case and excessively belligerent in the latter; no matter how much praise he received from couriers and sycophants like Corippus and Menander<sup>59</sup>. Even more problematic was his policy of benign neglect with regard to the final phase of the Lombard-Gepidic wars. If there was one thing that Justinian and earlier emperors had learned, it was that the barbarians could not be allowed to settle matters by themselves and without Imperial involvement except with serious adverse consequences for the Empire — the lesson was demonstrated once again in the case of the last Lombard-Gepidic war.

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59. Flavius Cresconius Corippus, *In laudem Iustiani Augusti minoris*, ed. and Averil Cameron, London, 1976, esp. bk. III, 271-400; Menander protector, *Fragmenta*, frg. 14.