An Arab Ambassador in Constantinople, late 10th century

[Adopted from Geanokoplos]

In the late tenth century the most powerful states in Western Eurasia were Byzantium and the Abbasid Empire. These states exchanged embassies constantly. This item is an extract from the detailed account of an Arab envoy to Constantinople in the late 10th century. His mission to the court of Basil II concerned Bardas Skleros, a claimant to the Byzantine throne who had gone to Baghdad seeking Arab support.

So I proceeded to Constantinople and made my entry after I had been met and most courteously escorted by court officials. I was honourably lodged in the palace of the Kanikleios N'cephorus (the envoy come with me) who stood in favour with the Sovereign. Next I was summoned to the presence of the Chamberlain [i.e., the eunuch Basil], who said: "We are acquainted with the correspondence which bears on your message, but state your views." Thereupon I produced the actual agreement, which he inspected and then said: "Was not the question of relinquishing the land-tax on Abu Taghlib's territory [at Mosul], both past and future, settled with al-Bakilani in accordance with your wishes, and did he not assent to our terms as to restoring the fortresses we had taken, and as to the arrest of Bardas? Your master accepted this agreement and complied with our wishes, for you have his ratification of the truce under his own hand." I said that al-Bakilani had not come to any arrangement at all; he replied that he had not left until he had settled the terms of agreement, of which the ratification under the hand of his sovereign was to be forwarded, and that he had previously produced his letter approving the whole of the stipulations. Accordingly I was driven to find some device in order to meet this position.

I said this: "Ibn al-Bakilani came to no agreement with you; it was Ibn Kunis who made this compact and took a copy of it in the Greek language." At this the Chamberlain broke out, and asked Ibn Kuinis "Who has authorized this?" to which he answered that neither he nor Ibn al-Bakilani had settled anything, and I withdrew.

A few days later the Chamberlain summoned me and resumed reading the agreement. He paused at a point where it spoke of "what might be settled with Ibn Shahram on the basis of what was contained in the third copy," and said that this was the one copy, but where were the other two? On referring to this passage I saw the blunder that had been committed in letting this stand, and said: "The meaning of the passage is that the agreement was to be in triplicate, one part to remain with the Byzantine ruler, one to be in Aleppo, and the third in the capital [Baghdad]." This Ibn Kunis traversed, saying that his instructions had been to note down the exact sense of the agreement, and the Chamberlain said that this copy was the ruling one; that the second copy referred to giving up the fortresses, whilst the third omitted all mention of Aleppo; that the agreement had been signed on the terms agreed upon with Ibn al-Bakilani, and the sole object in sending this copy was to procure the sovereign's hand and seal thereto. To which I said: "This cannot be so; my instructions are merely what I have stated as regards Aleppo and the fortresses,
in accordance with the agreement which you have seen." He replied: "Were Bardas [i.e., Skleros] here in force and you had made us all prisoners you could not ask for more than you are asking; and Bardas is, in fact, a prisoner." …

I replied: "Your supposed case of Bardas being here in force is of no weight, for you are well aware that when Abu Taghlib, who is not on a par with the lowest of 'Adud al-Daula's followers, assisted Bardas he foiled the Byzantine sovereigns for seven years; how would it be, then, were 'Adud al-Daula to assist him with his army? Bardas, although a prisoner in our hands, is not exposed, as Your captives are, to mutilation: his presence in the capital is the best thing for us, for we have not made a captive of him. It may be that he will fret at our putting him off, will despair of us, become estranged, and go away; but at present he is acting with us and is reassured by the pomp and security he witnesses at the capital. We hold in truth, all the strings."

My words impressed and nonplussed him greatly, for he knew them to be true, and he said: "What you ask cannot be granted; we will ratify, if you will, what was agreed on with al-Bakilani - else, depart." I replied: "If you wish me to depart without having had a hearing from the Sovereign I will do so." To this he said that he spoke for the Sovereign, but that he would ask an audience for me.

And in a few days time I was summoned and attended. The Byzantine Sovereign [Basil] caused what had passed to be repeated to him in my presence, and said: "You have come on a reprehensible errand: your envoy came and procured our consent to certain terms, which included the restoring of the fortresses taken during the revolt; you are now asking to have ceded other fortresses which were taken by my predecessors. Either consent to what was originally stipulated or go in peace." I replied: "But al-Bakilani agreed on nothing, for, as for the document he brought, you deprived us under its terms of half our territory; how can we admit such a thing against ourselves? Of these fortresses in Diyar Bakr none are held by you; now Diyar Bakr belongs to us: all you can do is to dispute it, and you do not know what will be the issue of the struggle." Here the Chamberlain interposed, saying: "This envoy is skilled in controversy and can make up a fine story: death is better for us than submission to these terms: let him return to his master." The Sovereign then rose, and I withdrew.


This text is part of the Internet Medieval Source Book. The Sourcebook is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts related to medieval and Byzantine history.

© Paul Halsall June 1997
halsall@murray.fordham.edu