Abstract/ Settling in the Carpathian Basin in 567–568 after the long trek from inner Asia, the pastoral Avars promoted the spread of late antique and early medieval Mediterranean cultures in general and, notably, Byzantine visual culture. Conversely, Avar culture itself underwent deep transformation as a result of diplomatic, political, and cultural encounters. These observations derive not only from Byzantine literary and material evidence, but also from analysis of a series of copper-based alloy cast belt ornaments and a gilt silver belt fitting of the mid-eighth century from the Carpathian Basin. These items all bear the portrait of a triumphant emperor of the late Roman type. This particular iconography was revived in eighth-century Constantinople by the emperors of the first Iconoclastic period, who sought appropriate visual tools expressing imperial power and superiority. In the course of a Byzantine diplomatic mission, a gift decorated with this imagery was sent to a member of the Avar elite to affirm, by visual means, that the recipient was a client of the Byzantine emperor.

Keywords/ Diplomatic Gifts, Imperial Image, Iconoclastic Period, Late Avar Belt Ornaments, Cultural Exchange

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Of Byzantine Diplomacy, the Emperor’s Image and the Avars*

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In his later twelfth-century Chronicle, Michael the Syrian (d. 1199), reproducing a lost paragraph of John of Ephesus’ sixth-century Ecclesiastical History in his Syriac translation, describes the military incursion of Avar and Slavic troops into Byzantium’s Balkan territories in 584 with the following words:

“The people of the Slavs (...) removed the churches’ objects of worship and large ciboria on [their] massive wagons, for example the one of the church of Corinth, which [their king] set up as a tent under which he resided”.

Speaking about the participants of the campaign, whose thrust turned northward after the devastation of Corinth, the sixth-century ecclesiastical historian, and Michael in his wake, noted that:

“They turned towards the city of Anchialos and the thermae of this place. Many of them were massacred by the army that was there. Finally, they tore down the walls; they found there the purple garment that Anastasia, the wife of Tiberius, had donated to the church when she visited the thermae. The Khagan donned [the purple garment] saying: ‘Whether the Emperor of the Romans wishes it or not, behold, the rulership has been conferred on me’”.

Even if we shall never know beyond the shadow of doubt whether the two events recorded in the quoted passages had actually occurred or had taken place exactly as narrated, they are a vivid illustration of one variant of a dynamic process, namely of how, upon encountering a cultural idiom differing radically from their own, the Barbarian groups living on the fringes of the Roman and Byzantine world made use of the symbols of the Roman/Byzantine world – reinterpreting them on some occasions, retaining their original meaning on others – to fit their own communications needs. The examples quoted above represent but one, even if often quite superficial, form of the interiorisation of foreign symbols in the recipient’s milieu, involving the incorporation of various objects of a foreign culture into the visual discourse over power and prestige with a minimal alteration or none at all.

Given the widely differing cultural backgrounds and traditions, we should hardly be surprised at encountering misunderstood or “barbarised” versions of the symbols of power used in the late antique Mediterranean cultures among the Avars, a people

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2 Michael the Syrian, Chronicle, Book x, ch. xxx: “Ils se tournèrent vers la ville d’Anchialos et vers les Thermes de cet endroit. Beaucoup d’entre eux avaient été massacrés par l’armée qui s’y trouvait. A la fin, ils renversèrent les murs; ils trouvèrent là les vêtements de pourpre qu’Anastasia, femme de Tiberius, avait donnés en voeu à l’église, lorsqu’elle se rendait aux Thermes. Khâgan s’en revêtit en disant: ‘Que l’empereur des Romains le veuille ou non, voici que la royauté m’a été donnée’”, in Chronique de Michel le Syrien (n. 1), pp. 362–363.
1a–b/ Medallions embellishing Jug 2 of the Nagyszentmiklós treasure, Sânnicolau Mare, Romania, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, first half of the 8th century

1a/ “Hunting in the sky”
1b/ “Victorious ruler”
consistently described as the par excellence military aggressors in sixth to seventh-century Byzantine sources, who arrived to and settled in the Carpathian Basin in 567–568 after a long trek from Inner Asia. However, the picture is infinitely more complex. The rigorous analysis of the archaeological record of the early and middle Avar period (roughly spanning the last third of the sixth and major parts of the seventh century) suggests that there evolved a culture of social representation emulating Byzantine patterns among the Avar elite following the settlement in the Carpathian Basin and the increasingly intensive (although not always peaceful) relations with Byzantium. In view of the structure of the material culture of the Avars, a pastoralist people whose shift to a more sedentary lifestyle was fairly slow, no more than a narrow segment of the cultural forms of the Mediterranean cultures could have been perceived as being suitable for transplanting into their own social and cultural representation: mainly Byzantine jewellery and costume accessories, principally belts, and silk played a crucial role in the visual communication between the two cultures. It is therefore hardly a coincidence that when the Avars sent their first envoys to Constantinople around 558, John of Ephesus records that the Emperor Justinian I:

“received the (...) ambassadors with great honour, and made them rich presents of gold and silver and dresses and girdles and saddles ornamented with gold; and sent also similar presents by their hands to their chiefs”.

Some years later, in order to persuade the Avars to enter into a military alliance against the nomadic people of the Pontic steppes (the Onogurs and Sabirs among them), Justinian again sent his envoys to the Avars, laden with rich gifts, “cords worked with gold, couches, silken garments and a great many other objects (...)”.

Not much later, Menander Protector records that an Avar embassy visited Justin II in Constantinople in 565:

“to receive the usual gifts which the previous emperor, Justinian, had given to their tribe. These were cords worked with gold which were made to confine what was escaping, and likewise couches and other luxury goods”.

Another remark made by Theophylact Simocatta sheds light on the nature of the “usual gifts” sent to the Avars by Byzantium. He mentions that in 584, at the beginning of Maurice’s reign, the Byzantines paid an annual tribute of “eighty thousand gold coins in the form of merchandise of silver and of embroidered cloth” to the Avars. These, then, were the prestige goods – among which we also find Byzantine insignia in a number of cases, which in addition to the hundreds of thousands of gold coins, gold couches, Indian spices (“pepper, the Indian leaf, cassia, and the thing called Saussurea”), and the famous elephant sent to the Avars reached the northern Barbarians from Byzantium as part of the exchange of gifts associated with the diplomatic engagement between elites, and which in part


7 Menander Protector Frg. 8, Greek text and English translation: The History of Menander (n. 6), pp. 92–93 (italics: author). For the possible meaning and political undertones of the phrase “cords worked with gold which were made to confine what was escaping”, see Ekaterina Nechaeva, “The Runaway Avars and Late Antique Diplomacy”, in Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World, Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity, Ralph Mathisen, Danuta Shanzer eds, Farnham 2011, pp. 175–181.


9 See for example Nechaeva, “The Runaway Avars”, (n. 7).

10 For the numerous written accounts testifying to the huge amounts of gold “sent” to or “paid” to the Avars, see Pohl, Die Awaren (n. 3). For the Byzantine coin finds known from the archaeological record, see Péter Somogyi, Byzantinische Fundmünzen der Awarenzeit, Monographien zur Frühgeschichte und Mittelalterarchäologie, v, Innsbruck 1997; and Idem, Byzantinische Fundmünzen der Awarenzeit. Eine Bestandsaufnahme 1998–2007”, Acta Archaeologica Carpatica, xxiii–xxiv (2007–2008), pp. 231–298.

11 Menander Protector Frg. 5.3, Frg. 8; Theophylact Simocatta, Universal History, Book i, ch. 3 (11–12), English translation: The History (n. 8), p. 24.


served the purpose of integrating the peoples living along the empire’s borders into Byzantium’s elaborate system of alliances. Prestige goods originating from distant lands had always played a prominent role in elite representation: they signalled the outstanding social rank of the wearer to the lower-status members of society, and thus represented an especially coveted luxury, a pattern to be imitated and followed, leading to the creation and fashion of inferior copies.

However, what we have seen in the above were various objects or articles that could be transformed within narrow limits. At the same time, the appearance of the visual elements of antique imagery in the Barbarian milieu testifies to a considerably deeper understanding and creative use of foreign visual forms. Taking the Avars living on the northern frontier of the Byzantine Empire from the last third of the sixth century to the ninth century as a case study, it is by all means remarkable that while the elite rapidly and successfully integrated one portion of the symbols adopted from the Mediterranean into its own material culture, the mastering of the Mediterranean visual vocabulary lasted for a much longer time. As far as this can be ascertained from the material preserved in the grave inventories, the Avars’ own visual culture was essentially aniconic, in which the sixth–seventh-century human depictions tend to occur, even if not exclusively, on Mediterranean-Byzantine artefact types, or on objects that can be ultimately derived from such object types that served as their models.

In contrast, there is a marked increase in figural depictions, including human portrayals, during the eighth century, even if this tendency did not lead to a change in the fundamentally aniconic nature of Avar visual art as preserved in the archaeological record. The most remarkable objects with human depictions in the eighth-century Carpathian Basin are undoubtedly Jugs 2 and 7 of the Nagyszentmiklós Treasure (Sânnicolau Mare/RO)\(^\text{15}\). Three of the four scenes adorning Jug 2, namely “the hunting ruler” /Fig. 1a/ (often described as a “hunting in the sky” scene in the case of this particular jug), “the victorious ruler” /Fig. 1b/ and the dynamic animal combat scene /Fig. 2c/ are well-known types in the visual idiom expressing royal power both in the Roman/Byzantine and the Iranian world. The goldsmith crafting Jug 2 added an independent, very personal interpretation to these widespread visual topoi through the superb, individualising portrayal of the faces, one that mirrored the ethnic relations in the Carpathian Basin. The Turanid physiognomy of the “victorious ruler” /Fig. 1b/ and of the fanciful creature ridden by the “hunting ruler” /Fig. 1a/, the Slavic visage of the defeated enemy’s head held by the “victorious ruler” /Fig. 1b/ and the Germanic traits of the head hung on the cantle /Fig. 1b/ provide a clear articulation of the Avar elite’s self-image and its perception of the peoples it ruled over during the earlier eighth century. The fourth scene, the so-called “rape into the sky” /Fig. 2d/ depicting a nude woman held by a predatory bird with spread wings in its talons most likely conveyed a visual message about the ancestry of the family commissioning the jug, linking the family’s ancestors to a narrative in the world of Avar myths. The meticulously planned iconographic programme of Jug 2 thus suggests that, in addition to the portable symbols of power, the Avar elite (or at least a part

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15 See also the arguments presented by Matthew P. Canepa, “Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction Among Ancient and Early Medieval Visual Cultures”, Ars Orientalis, xxxvi (2010), pp. 7–29, sp. pp. 11–12.


17 Such as circular box brooches, strap-ends displaying human faces/masks, anthropomorphic figural casts, etc. see Garam, Funde byzantinischer Herkunft (n. 14); Bollók, “Kép és képnélküliség” (n. 16), p. 215 (both with further literature).


19 For brief descriptions and colour photos of the Nagyszentmiklós/Sânnicolau Mare vessels, see The Gold of the Avars (n. 18). For the Avar origin of the Nagyszentmiklós/Sânnicolau Mare treasure and a critical appraisal of the various interpretations proposed by previous scholarship, see Csanád Bálint, Der Schatz von Nagyszentmiklós. Archäologische Studien, Váriá Archaeologica Hungarica, xvi b, Budapest 2011.

20 The physical anthropological analysis was made by Kinga K. Éry; for her findings, see Bálint, Der Schatz (n. 19), pp. 212–216.

21 It is perhaps no coincidence that the analysis of the archaeological record led to the identification of several different cultural groups during the Avar period in the Carpathian Basin, among whom we find communities with a Germanic, Romanised provincial, Slavic and Eastern European steppean ancestry in addition to the Avars in the sixth–seventh centuries, see Tivadar Vida, “Conflict and Coexistence: The Local Population of the Carpathian Basin under Avar Rule (Sixth to Seventh Century)”, in The Other Europe in the Middle Ages. Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, and Cumans, Florin Curta ed., Leiden/Boston 2008, pp. 13–46.

22 For the assumption that the “rape into the sky” scene can perhaps be linked to an Avar myth unknown to us, see Bálint, Der Schatz (n. 19), pp. 354–356.
2c–d/ Medallions embellishing Jug 2 of the Nagyszentmiklós treasure, Sânnicolau Mare, Romania, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, first half of the 8th century

2c/ “Animal combat scene”
2d/ “Rape into the sky”
of it), which by the eighth century had been living on the fringes of the Mediterranean world for almost 150 years, had finally mastered the visual language that blended elements of trans-Mediterranean and Iranian ancestry for expressing royal power, and was capable of employing it to convey its own messages.

Still, the above represent but one dimension of cultural interactions, a glimpse from the perspective of the recipient milieu, and thus offer partial evidence of how the visual language created from Mediterranean elements was deployed by the peoples of the periphery: they provide some indication of their intentions and of the type of messages they wished to transmit. It thus seems instructive to briefly glance at the other side, the donor milieu, even more so, because it would seem that the adoption of a Mediterranean-inspired visual language in the Avar world occurred not during the most intensive period of Byzantine-Avar political relations, i.e. during the last third of the sixth and the earlier seventh century, but later, from the last decades of the seventh century onwards, at a time when the Avars are barely mentioned in the written sources at our disposal, which in Byzantium also coincided with the outbreak of the Iconoclastic crisis, brought on by the fierce disputes over the permissibility of religious images. It is therefore particularly noteworthy that the eighth-century Avar cast copper-based alloy belt fittings occasionally bear scenes, even if in a strongly distorted form, such as the various labours of Heracles, nereids sitting on seahorses, Daniel in the lions’ den, Samson defeating the lion and amphitheatre/hunting scenes among others that are more customary on late antique costume elements (especially on late antique Egyptian textiles). In the following, I shall examine one particular element of this visual repertoire, which can shed light not only on how this Mediterranean-inspired visual idiom spread among the Avars, but also illuminates the Byzantine side of this issue. It must be noted in advance that despite its being one of the most widespread late antique depiction types on late Avar cast adornments, the imagery to be discussed here, namely the imperial portraits appearing on Avar costume accessories, are probably more of an exception compared to the examples cited in the above than a more general phenomenon.

3/ Upper part of a silver-gilt belt mount, Grave 434 of the Szeged-Kiskundorozsma, Kettőshatár II cemetery, Hungary, mid- to late 8th century

4/ Copper-based alloy circular belt mount, Grave 2 of the Zemun Polje cemetery, Serbia, 8th century
Although belt ornaments bearing an emperor’s portrait e.g. /Figs 3–4/ or a male bust, obviously derived from the former e.g. /Figs 5–8/, appearing among the eighth-century Avar belt sets have been extensively studied, the precise origins of this image type continued to elude researchers specialising in the archaeology of early medieval South-East Europe. This is hardly surprising, given the strongly corrupted (“barbarised”) formal variants of the image encountered among the earliest found pieces of the type. Despite significant earlier scholarship on elucidating the motif’s origins, genuine advances were only made after the discovery of a new find in the late Avar period burial ground containing forty-three graves uncovered at the Szeged-Kiskundorozsma, Kettőshatár II site (Csongrád County)26. The pentagonal silver-gilt belt mount /Fig. 3/ as well as the fragment of a similar mount left in the grave by the robbers found in Grave 434, one of the looted burials in the almost wholly robbed small cemetery27, finally provided conclusive evidence that the object held by the male bust appearing on the much poorer eighth-century copper-based alloy belt fittings /Figs 4–7/, whose origins were sought in the most diverse prototypes, is in fact a vegetal element, a simplified version of a laurel branch.28 The Kiskundorozsma mount also sheds light on several other characteristic traits of the humbler cast belt fittings. Several elements of late antique emperor representations can be clearly identified on the 4.15 cm high and 3.99 cm wide Kiskundorozsma ornament /Fig. 3/ whose lower pendant part most likely broke off and was lost when the grave was looted. A two-row pearl diadem encircles the emperor’s head on the right-facing profile bust on the Kiskundorozsma mount (however, the medallion gracing the forehead appearing on most similar late antique portrayals is lacking).29 The chlamys worn by the emperor is fastened with a disc brooch of the type familiar from imperial portraits. The emperor holds a laurel branch in front of his face and a similar branch can be seen behind the bust. The uniqueness of the silver-gilt Kiskundorozsma mount, which stands out from among the other late Avar specimens, is further accentuated by the fact that on the testimony of the technological studies, the goldsmith had crafted it from 138 separate elements30.

The manufacturing technique and the elegance of the emperor portrait on the Kiskundorozsma mount make it a unique piece among the similar eighth-century relics of the Carpathian Basin. The other belt mounts and buckles bearing a male bust are simple pieces, either cast in one or pressed; the barbarisation of the emperor holding a laurel branch is quite advanced even on the pieces with a fair craftsmanship. It is not my intention to trace this process by reviewing all the known pieces – I shall merely illustrate the changes that occurred during the copying through a few select examples.31

Mounts preserving most elements of the original

23 For the latest written sources, see Pohl, Die Awaren (n. 3), p. 278, for the potentials and circumstances of diplomatic relations after the Avar siege of Constantinople in 626, see Péter Somogyi, “New Remarks on the Flow of Byzantine Coins in Avaria and Walachia During the Second Half of the Seventh Century”, in The Other Europe (n. 21), pp. 83–149, sp. pp. 125–145.


25 Due to limitations of space, it is not possible to review earlier interpretations in full. For a brief summary, see Falko Daim, Das aszerbicische Gräberfeld von Leobersdorf, nö. Band i, Studien zur Archäologie der Awaren, iii, Vienna 1987, pp. 145–147.


28 For the proper identification of the vegetal element, see Daim et al., “Kaiser, Vögel, Rankenwerke” (n. 27), pp. 295–296.

29 Ibidem, p. 293.


emperor portrait were found in Grave 2 of the small burial ground at Zemun Polje (SRB) /Fig. 4/: the emperor’s coiffure with the diadem, the chlamys fastened with a disc brooch at the left shoulder and the branch held by the male bust. Vestiges of the diadem and the chlamys (although without a disc brooch) as well as the branch held by the male bust can be definitely made out on a strap-end from Sajópetri /Fig. 5/, on which the long, narrow field is filled with four emperor busts placed one under the other. The further simplification or, to put it otherwise, “barbarisation” of the form, represented by the buckle from Leobersdorf and the buckle plate and round mounts from Čunovo /Fig. 6/ led to disappearance of the disc brooch, the barely recognisable diadem on the head of the male bust and the chlamys, while the hand holding the branch became disproportionately large and the foliate branch blends into the hand. The recognisability of the finer elements deteriorates even further on a series of other strap-ends and round mounts: the diadem becomes a fillet, the chlamys a mere fold, while the branch in the hand is reduced to a leaf or a simple line in front of the face /Fig. 7/. In the latter phases, the “barbarisation” is apparent in the portrayal of the face, and were it not for the Kiskundorozsma mount and the round mounts from Zemun Polje, the prototype of the imagery could hardly be unequivocally identified. On other belt fittings, especially on some of the buckle plates /Fig. 8/ and strap-ends adorned with a male bust, we witness the disappearance of the hand extending from the bust together with branch held in the hand, while more or less identifiable vestiges of the diadem and the chlamys, although without any indication of the disc brooch, regularly survive.

The facts that (1) almost all of the copper-based alloy belt fittings known from the eighth-century Carpathian Basin display male busts facing right; (2) on the pieces on which the bust’s hand is also portrayed, the hand holds a branch, a hardly widespread portrayal in late antique imperial iconography; and (3) that in contrast to the late antique and Byzantine depictions, on which, with a few exceptions, the disc brooch for fastening the chlamys is always at the right shoulder, the brooch is at the left shoulder on the pieces from the Carpathian Basin would suggest that the
overwhelming majority of the depictions from the Carpathian Basin\textsuperscript{41} were directly or indirectly modelled on the Kiskundorozsma imperial portrait or on a piece or pieces which resembled it regarding the most important details. There is some scholarly disagreement over where the Kiskundorozsma mounts were produced. The research team engaged in the meticulous analysis of the mount concluded that the manufacturing technique and the sophistication of the emperor’s portrait all indicate that this piece can be assigned to the mounts made in a Byzantine workshop, and that it had reached the Carpathian Basin as a diplomatic gift\textsuperscript{42}. In contrast, the site’s excavator and his team contend – even if their arguments are not always convincing – that the mount had been crafted in the Carpathian Basin, although they regard it as the product of a non-Avar workshop\textsuperscript{43}.

In fact, the placement of the disc brooch fastening the chlamys and the slightly disproportionate size of the emperor’s hand indeed suggest a copyist who was not wholly familiar with the meaning of the prototype. Still, these details are in themselves insufficient for pinpointing the place of manufacture. The exceptional workmanship of the mount in the context of the Avar milieu does not necessarily exclude the possibility that it had been a copy of a Byzantine original made for a

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{2} Zemun Polje (szaa), Grave 2: Dimitrijević, “Der Fund”, (n. 31), pls 5, 7x–e.
\bibitem{32} Leobersdorf (Niederösterreich/), Grave 69: Daim, \textit{Das avarische Gräberfeld} (n. 25), p. 341, plate 63, 2/1.
\bibitem{33} Čunovo (Hung, Dunácsûn; Bratislavský kraj, Okres Bratislava, sk), Grave 21: Nándor Fettich, \textit{Bronzeguss und Nomadenkunst auf Grund der ungarländischen Denkmäler}, Prague 1929, plate vii, 14–15.
\bibitem{34} For example Fancsalszky, \textit{Állat- és emberábrázolások} (n. 18), plate 51, 12–14, 17 and plate 52, 1–4.
\bibitem{37} The single exceptions being the pieces with facing busts or, in cases when the busts were placed one under the other, the rhythmic alteration of right- and left-facing busts, see Fancsalszky, \textit{Állat- és emberábrázolások} (n. 18), plate 51, 15 and plate 52, 6, 8–9, 11, 14–15.
\bibitem{38} See Daim [et al.], “Kaiser, Vögel, Rankenwerke”, (n. 27), p. 294.
\bibitem{40} For example Fancsalszky, \textit{Állat- és emberábrázolások} (n. 18), plate 52.4–5.
\bibitem{41} Obviously, we cannot exclude the possibility that the simpler depictions, which are lacking most of the typical traits, were modelled on other prototypes with a different bust portrayal.
\bibitem{42} Daim [et al.], “Kaiser, Vögel, Rankenwerke” (n. 27), p. 289.
\bibitem{43} Szalontai/Károly, “Runiform Fragments” (n. 27), p. 379; Szalontai/Benedek/Károly, “A Kiskundorozsma Kettőshatár úti” (n. 27), pp. 186–189.
\end{thebibliography}
member of the Avar ruling elite. Some of the vessels of the Nagyszentmiklós Treasure produced in the Carpathian Basin are in themselves an indication that remarkably good quality articles had been made for the Avar ruling elite in the eighth century as well – even if most of these were never buried. Be that as it may, the imperial portrait is visibly archaising: the facial features of the Kiskundorozsma emperor closely resemble fourth- and early fifth-century Roman imperial portraits\(^{44}\), while the iconographic type itself, the emperor’s profile bust holding a laurel branch, seems to have disappeared from Roman designs in the late third/early fourth century\(^{45}\). The eighth-century appearance of these features leaves little doubt that this imagery was for some reason revived in Constantinople five centuries after its last use, whence it reached the Avars in the eighth century. The first question that springs to mind is why was an imagery that was popular several centuries earlier revived in Byzantium in the eighth century?

As a starting point, it seems convenient to turn to Jérémie Chameroy’s findings, who has convincingly argued that the emperor on the Kiskundorozsma mount represents the triumphing \textit{basileios}\(^{46}\). It might appear surprising at first sight to find an object bearing the portrait of a Roman/Byzantine ruler among the costume accessories of a Barbarian noble. However, the currently known relics all testify that the custom of wearing coins and medallions with the emperor’s portrait, received by the Barbarian elite as Roman gifts, was not exceptional among the Barbarian rulers living on the empire’s fringes\(^{47}\), and neither was the practice of donating costume accessories bearing the imperial portrait to the neighbouring powers unusual in Byzantium. For example, John Malalas reports that during the reign of Justin I (r. 518–527), Tzathios, ruler of Laz, a Caucasian kingdom, arrived at Constantinople and:

“asked to be proclaimed emperor of the Laz. He was received by the emperor, baptized, and, having become a Christian, married a Roman wife named Valeriana, the granddaughter of Nomos the patrician (…). He had been crowned by Justin, the emperor of the Romans, and had put on a Roman imperial crown and a white cloak of pure silk. Instead of the purple border it had the gold imperial border; in its middle was a true purple portrait medallion with a likeness of the emperor Justin. He also wore a white tunic, a paragaudion, with gold imperial embroideries, equally including the likeness of the emperor”\(^{48}\).
There is nothing unique either about the occasion itself, or about the described costume elements. The habit of donating costume elements, mostly silken garments, decorated with the emperor’s portrait was a widespread practice: they were presented not only to courtiers and provincial governors, but also to high-ranking foreigners on whom imperial titles were conferred in recognition of their acknowledgement of the imperial power. Costume elements were regarded as the perfect diplomatic gift in the Byzantine court because by donning a costume element adorned with the Byzantine emperor’s portrait, the wearer symbolically accepted the emperor’s overlordship. As Warren T. Woodfin put it:

“The imperial portraits symbolically subject the wearer to the universal sovereignty of the emperor in Constantinople. By assimilating foreign rulers to the imagined role of imperial retainers, such textiles thus help to mediate between Byzantines’ political theory of ‘One God, one Christ, one emperor’ and the reality of multiplicity of kingdoms beyond their borders.”

Such silken garments or fragments of such one-time garments bearing the image of the enthroned or triumphing equestrian emperor are known from several Western European collections, indicating that the donation of these costume elements was a regular and time-honoured practice in Byzantine diplomacy.

Thus, the appearance of the triumphing basileios on the Kiskundorozsma belt fittings is hardly unusual or inexplicable: the belt mounts may have reached the Carpathian Basin as a diplomatic gift sent to an eighth-century Avar leader or they may have been modelled on an object sent as a gift. What still remains to be explained is that while the image of the triumphing emperor is also familiar from the silks of the middle Byzantine period, which had perhaps reached the West as diplomatic gifts, and the surviving relics bear an imagery known from the period’s iconography, the Kiskundorozsma belt fittings are adorned with an archaizing portrait.

Interestingly enough, this image type, which disappeared for long centuries after the late third/fourth century, then resurfaced briefly in the eighth century, is also encountered in another location: on the silver lid of a small cylindrical silver box from Spain, dating from the last third of the eighth century. It seems to me that the silver box and its lid should be discussed separately since, as already noted by their first publisher, the two were made by two separate hands, probably in two different workshops, at least judging from their stylistic traits. The fairly low quality of craftsmanship characterising the box is in striking contrast to the elegantly modelled, elaborate lid. The joining of the box and the lid too seems to indicate that the two pieces do not belong together (on the testimony of the available photos, only the hook of the locking mechanism was made together with the lid, while the loop on the back of the lid appears to be an element that was soldered to it subsequently); however, only a detailed study on the manufacturing techniques and the metal composition can shed light on the separate and shared history of the box and the lid. The formal

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44 As correctly stressed by Daim [et al.], “Kaiser, Vögel, Rankenwerke” (n. 27), p. 292.
51 For the role of the emperor’s image in Byzantine investiture, see for exampleGrabar, L’Empereur (n. 49), pp. 5–10.
52 Woodfin, “Presents Given” (n. 50), p. 44.
54 See for example the silk fragment preserved in the “Bamberger Domsepultur”: Rom und Byzanz (n. 39), pp. 213–214, cat. no. 66.
traits of the lid definitely recall the box-shaped agraffe pairs used for fastening clothes fashionable in seventh–eighth-century Byzantium and among the followers of Byzantine fashion, and it is therefore quite possible that the silver object later used as a box lid was originally one of a pair of agraffes. In this interpretation, the left-facing profile bust of the emperor wearing a pearl diadem and a chlamys fastened with a disc brooch at the right shoulder makes quite good sense. Similarly to the Byzantine silks embroidered with the imperial portrait, the original clasp may have been part of a diplomatic gift sent by a Byzantine emperor to the West. Its one-time owner may have had it reworked into a box lid for the same reason that western rulers refashioned the textiles bearing imperial portraits received from the Byzantine emperor and donated them to ecclesiastical institutions, namely in order to neutralise their political message.

The very fact that the archaising variant of the triumphing emperor holding a laurel branch appears on two relics from the later eighth century – the Kiskundorozsma belt fittings and the Hispanic lid – can undoubtedly be associated with the image’s political significance. It seems feasible that the Constantinopolitan court revived this imagery, originating from the time of the unified Roman Empire, as a reference to the united empire for a brief period in the eighth century and chose it for communication with the lords of distant territories (Pannonia and Hispania) which in the third–fourth centuries had still lain within the empire’s confines. This choice would have made sense for several reasons, the most important among them being that the message of this relatively neutral image may have seemed less offensive than the contemporaneous portraits of the triumphing basileios: the equestrian or enthroned emperor, or a scene portraying his triumph over Barbarians. Even so, the aspect of victory, symbolised by the laurel branch, was obvious to the Byzantines even as late as the eighth century. In Byzantine eyes, this archaising image no doubt evoked a period which, in contrast to the contemporary reality, legitimised not only Byzantium’s ecumenical rule, but also the claim to the lands in the possession of the recipients of gifts. At the same time, neither the lack of an identifying inscription or of characterised facial features, nor the repetition of the same imperial portrait on a series of identical casts would have insulted the authority of an eighth-century Byzantine emperor. In fact, the very opposite was true, given that in the case of medieval Byzantine imperial portraits, it was “the regalia, not the physiognomy of the face or the body” that was recognized, while “the repetitive images (…) evoke the idea of universal dominion: the many identical images as a stand-in for one figure of unbounded sway”. The archaising tendency in imperial imagery, i.e. the revival of iconographic formulae long fallen into disuse in order to convey and emphasise the desired political message was hardly unaccustomed among the many tools used by the emperors of the first Iconoclastic period. On the other hand, the use of archaising visual elements in support of an imperial ideology emphasising imperial victory and renovatio was as customary for the emperors of the first Iconoclastic period, as was the search for new visual forms expressing imperial power and superiority, the latter reflected, among others, by the incorporation of select elements of the visual vocabulary rooted in Sasanian art used in the Umayyad court into the imagery of Byzantine imperial ideology in order to serve their own needs of “conveying the military and cultural superiority of the emperor.”

There are few clues to the actual source of what was quite certainly an archaising image in the eighth century. What seems certain is that there were few places in the eighth century where objects bearing a late Roman imagery would more likely have survived other than Constantinople. The antique and late antique relics scattered throughout the city – which played a perceptibly prominent role in the eighth-century discourse over the elite’s self-definition in the empire’s capital – as well as the collections in the palaces of prominent families and, most importantly, in the Great Palace of the emperors, presumably comprised several reliefs bearing the image discussed here. These could equally well include coins, gems and largitio plates, but neither can we exclude late Roman belt buckles and brooches displaying an imperial portrait. As a single eloquent example, let me allude to the famous late antique vessels exhibited in the imperial palace in the tenth century, namely the embossed silver missoria of Jordanes, most...
likely the *magister militum per orientem* during the reign of Arcadius, kept in the imperial *vestiarium*, as well as the platters called *Likinios* (presumably depicting the fourth-century emperor), *Ekthoktronos* and *Panaretos*. There must also have been at least a few persons in the imperial court who, despite the period’s frequent misunderstandings over the interpretation of the monuments of earlier periods as exemplified by the *Parastaseis Sytomoi Chroikai*, were familiar with the meaning of the imagery in question and had a rough idea of the date of the objects on which they were to be found.

Another no less important, hardly negligible question is the interpretation by the recipient of the gift that conveyed an unmistakable political message. As we have seen above, we know too little about the Hispanic box and its lid to offer a reassuring answer. As far as the Avars are concerned, irrespective of whether the recipient of the Byzantine gift wore the costume accessory portraying the triumphing emperor or whether he re-gifted it to one of his subjects in order to neutralise the political message, belt fittings and buckles adorned with the imperial bust became popular and widely used adornments among the Avars, and were copied by other social groups too. The rapid “barbarisation” of Byzantium at the time, the gifts of “clothes and (...) insignia” were no more than a visual reference to elite culture. Irrespective of whether the Avar noble receiving the gift understood and accepted the visual argument which, through the portrait of the triumphing emperor, declared him a client ruler of the Byzantine emperor, which was at most an abstract legal claim in the eighth century rather than a political reality, given the situation of the Avars and Byzantium at the time, the gifts of “clothes and (...) insignia” became marks of aristocratic distinction in that culture, as they were reserved for the king and...
his courtiers alone”. And, as such, “[it] became a symbol of prestige rather than submission.”

Considering that the Kiskundorozsma belt fittings and the looted burial from which it was recovered cannot be dated more closely than the mid-eighth century or the century’s later half, not even an educated guess can be made as to what particular event called for a Byzantine-Avar exchange of embassies, as a result of which the costume element with the image of the triumphing basileios reached the Carpathian Basin. The eighth century, a period of “splendid isolation” for the Avars, saw Constantine V’s (r. 741–775) wars against the Bulgars in the 750–770s, when the imperial troops appeared in the Lower Danube region, which would have meant an excellent, practically self-evident opportunity for the revival of diplomatic relations with the Avars and for the renewal/confirmation of the alliance with the Avar ruler, whom Byzantium had, in principle, always regarded as a client ruler. The broadly determined chronological position of the Kiskundorozsma mount does not necessarily contradict a scenario in which the lords of Byzantium sent this object—or some other article bearing the imperial portrait on which the mount was modelled—to an Avar leader as part of the preparation for one of the campaigns. However, an assumption along these lines would confine the interpretation of the known Avar relics within very limited chronological boundaries, even if Byzantium’s search for allies for the campaign against the Bulgars may have started earlier, in the period preceding the military expeditions themselves. Still, even in knowledge of the belt fittings of Byzantine origin in the late Avar material, it does not seem prudent to set the eighth-century Avar-Byzantine political and cultural contacts left unmentioned by the written sources within a strongly restricted framework, one linked strictly to events, even more so because we know very little about the local events in the Carpathian Basin or about the shifts in local power relations. What we do know is that there was a profound change in the Avar political climate in the last decades of the eighth century, and possibly even earlier. The khagan’s central power was weakened, while the influence of the dignitaries below him perceptibly increased. Events of this type, no doubt accompanied by conflicts, always provided a good opportunity for the interference of external powers or for turning to them, the latter often involving investiture with symbols provided by the foreign power. Without an adequate knowledge of the actual historical events, and in the lack of an adequately precise chronology for the archaeological material, even a hypothetical outline of the possible rationales on the Byzantine and Avar side would lead too far, even if set within a historical framework. Still, what the Kiskundorozsma belt fittings and the circle of similar finds do clearly indicate is that at the time of the first Iconoclastic period, when the debates over the issues of imperial power and religious images were much fiercer than ever before, the imperial image—whose veneration, too, became a contested issue that had been addressed at the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787—remained one of, if not the most powerful sign(s) and argument(s) in the profane sphere, among others, in the visual language of Byzantine diplomacy.

75 Canepa, “Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction” (n. 15), pp. 16–17.
76 It is interesting to note here that although Grave 434 seems to have been dug in the last third of the eighth century, the mounts themselves can, on typological grounds, rather be assigned to roughly the middle third of the same century. For the chronology of the silver-gilt belt mounts and of the whole cemetery, see Daim et al., “Kaiser, Vögel, Rankenwerke” (n. 27), p. 283; Szalontai/Károly, “Runiform Fragments” (n. 27), pp. 379–382; Szalontai/Benedek/Károly, “A Kiskundorozsma Kettőshatár úti” (n. 27), pp. 176–178, 184, 187.
79 Especially in view of the fact that the Kiskundorozsma mount as well as the overwhelming majority of the late Avar cast articles bearing this imagery belong roughly to the middle decades of the eighth century.
80 See Daim et al., “Kaiser, Vögel, Rankenwerke” (n. 27), pp. 278–287 (with further literature).
81 For this process and the lower ranking dignitaries, see Pohl, Die Awaren (n. 3), pp. 292–306; Béla Miklós Szőke, The Carolingian Age in the Carpathian Basin, Budapest 2014, pp. 9–26.
83 For some aspects of this language, see Robin Cormack, “But is it art?”, in Byzantine Diplomacy, Jonathan Shephard, Simon Franklin eds, Aldershot 2003, pp. 219–236.
Hlavním cílem článku je ukázat, jak diplomatické, politické a kulturní setkání Avarů (pastevců, kteří se mezi lety 567–568 usídlili v Panonské pánvi po cestě z „vnitřní Asie“) s pozdně antickou a raně středověkou kulturou a s konkrétními případy byzantského umění podpořilo rozšíření středomořských prvků v avarské vizuální kultuře, stejně jako její vnitřní proměnu. Písemné prameny pravidelně zmiňují zlatá lehátka, hedvábné oděvy a zlaté ozdobky pásků a sedel jako byzantské diplomatické dary věnované avarským velvyslancům a vůdcům. Autor studie analyzuje řadu ozdob pásků odlitých ze slitiny na bázi mědi a pozlaceného stříbrného kování (z Kiskundorozsma-Kettőshátář, 2. pohřebiště), datovaných od poloviny 8. století a nesoucích portrét triumfujícího císaře pozdně římského typu. Soudí, že tato ikonografie byla obnovena v 8. století v Konstantinopoli. Diplomatický dar zdobený tímto vyobrazením byl poslán členovi avarské elity jako vizuální vyjadření toho, že příjemce byl spojencem byzantského císaře. Skrze připomenutí Tzathiova slavného ceremoniálu investitury v Konstantinopoli s korunovačními klenoty a hedvábným šatem, nesoucími portrét císaře Justiniana I., autor navrhoje, že obdobný úmysl motivoval poslání byzantského dara s vyobrazením císaře avarskému vůdci. Je těžké určit, zda avarský příjemce rozuměl v plném rozsahu vizuálnímu poselství zvyku zobrazování císaře. Počet kopii vytvořených lokálními umělci v Panonské pánvi však jasně ukazuje, že tento typ obrazu, pokud byl nošen členy nižší společenské vrstvy, signalizuje přihlášení se k jejich vlastním elitám, i kdyby císařský portrét na těchto předmětech neznamenal nic víc než jen vizuální odkaz ke kultuře těchto elit. Na základě studia raně středověké byzantské literatury a hmotných důkazů se autor domnívá, že oživení pozdně římského typu obrazu triumfujícího císaře, objevujícího se na ozdobách pásků z 8. století, je snad důsledkem pátrání po staré, dlouho nepoužívané ikonografické formuli, využité císaři z prvního období vzdáleného císařství, kterého měla sloužit jejich potřebě vyjádřit císařskou moc a nadřazenost. Vychází z časů jednotné Římské říše, kde triumfující basileios, objevující se na předmětech z 8. století, byl se vši pravděpodobnosti zamýšlen jako odkaz k jednotnému císařství. Proto se zdál být ideálním nástrojem pro vyjádření byzantských nároků na pozemky držené příjemci darů, tedy soudobými pány vzdálených území (jako byla Panonie), která ve třetí čtvrtině století stále spadala pod hranice císařství.