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THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF ZERKŌN THE *MAUROUSIOS*: FROM WEST TO EAST AND BACK AGAIN

Introduction

In the year 449, a diplomatic mission left Constantinople, bound for the *terra incognita* of central Europe. Its covert aim, masterminded by certain prominent individuals at the court of Theodosius II (408-50), was to assassinate the greatest barbarian warlord of the day, Attila the Hun. In that goal it failed, since the Hun Edeco, whom Theodosius' eunuch *spatharius* Chrysaphius had sought to embroil in the plot, betrayed it to Attila.[1] As a result, Attila would remain a potent threat to the Empire in both East and West until his unexpected death four years later.[2] Even so, the embassy remains of great interest because it is described in vivid and immediate detail by one of its participants, the Greek historian Priscus of Panium. He recounts the embassy's journey from the imperial capital and then beyond the frontier to Attila's residence (and, later, the return leg); along the way he notes various interactions between the embassy and individuals at Attila's court. Priscus had been invited along as a companion by one of the envoys, Maximinus, a young bureaucrat with a promising career, from whom the assassination plot was concealed.[3]

Among the many astonishing tableaux that Priscus offers of the reception of the envoys, one in particular stands out:[4] an eye-witness description of a feast hosted by Attila at which Priscus himself was in attendance, and which offers us a rare first hand account of the leader of the Huns on home ground surrounded by his inner circle.[5] This is the first of three feasts at Attila's compound mentioned in the account: the second is one hosted by Attila's wife, Hereka, and the third was hosted once more by Attila three days before the envoys departed on their return journey.[6]

The account of the first feast is the most detailed and offers extraordinary insight into various aspects of ceremonial at Attila's court: the formal invitation issued to the envoys; their

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[1] For the plot and its betrayal, see Priscus fr. 11.2, pp. 246, 253 Blockley = fr. 8.1, 32 Carolla. For the personalities involved, see PLRE 2, 295-7 (Chrysaphius); 2.385-6 (Edeco); cf. Baldwin 1980, 35.

[2] For the wider context, see Blockley 1992, 59-67; Millar 2006, 80-82; Lenski 2014.

[3] See, respectively, PLRE 2, 743 (Maximinus 11) and 2, 906 (Priscus 1).

[4] For an overview of the account from an ethnographic perspective, see Maas 1995.

[5] Priscus fr. 13.1-3, pp. 282-288 Blockley = frr. 8.151-173 and 11 Carolla.

[6] Priscus fr. 14, pp. 290-292 Blockley = fr. 8.178-187 Carolla.

arrival at the banqueting hall, where they are offered a drink to toast Attila's success before being admitted; the careful arrangement of furniture and draperies in the banqueting chamber; the seating of the guests around Attila according to rank; the drinking of toasts by Attila and his guests, again according to their rank; the serving of food and yet more drink; and a final round of toasts between Attila and his guests after the meal. As twilight drew on, torches were lit to illuminate the hall for the evening's entertainments: first came two bards who chanted songs about Attila's campaigns and personal displays of bravery; next «a Scythian whose mind was deranged came forward and, by uttering outlandish, unintelligible, and altogether crazy words, caused all to burst into laughter»[7]; after this came the individual with whom this article is concerned: Zerkōn, a figure with several noticeable physical disabilities, who served as a further object of derision and laughter for the assembled Huns.

By the standards of the tumultuous sweep of fifth-century history, Zerkōn is easily dismissed as a figure of marginal significance – and this perhaps explains the absence of an entry for him in the second volume of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*.[8] While, thanks to Priscus, we know a great deal about Zerkōn's biography, previous analyses of him have tended to focus either on his status as an entertainer or on his disabilities.[9] While these (especially the latter) are important perspectives, they restrict consideration of Zerkōn to his minor role at court and his physical challenges. This article aims to examine his story in a broader framework, using Zerkōn's life story to illuminate relationships in the mid-fifth century between, on the one hand, the Roman Empire and its neighbours, and, on the other hand, the Eastern and Western *partes imperii*. To that end, I will analyse first the survival of Priscus' account of Zerkōn, because this is less than straightforward. Next, I will review the role he plays in Priscus' narrative, particularly as part of the author's presentation of the relationship between Constantinople and the Huns under Theodosius II. Finally, I will analyse Zerkōn's biography, particularly his traversing of long distances between East and West against the backdrop of the fracturing unity of the Roman world, to reveal details of a remarkable individual living in convulsive times.

Reconstructing Priscus

As noted, Zerkōn is mentioned in an eyewitness account of Attila's feast by Priscus, whose work, in eight books, covered the history of the Roman Empire and its barbarian neighbours from the 430s to the 470s. Like other secular historians of the age, Priscus wrote in a classicising style intended to evoke the pioneering historiography of Herodotus and Thucydides in the fifth century BCE.[10] Although the later ecclesiastical historian Evagrius

[7] Priscus fr. 13.1, p. 286 Blockley = fr. 8.169 Carolla.

[8] PLRE 2, 1203 goes straight from (Z)enofilus to Zilgibis. He is mentioned in passing, however, at 27 (under Aëtius 7), 168 (under Aspar) and 230 (under Bleda).

[9] For analysis of Zerkōn from the perspective of disability, see Laes 2013; Laes 2018, 55-58. For his place in Priscus' ethnography, see Maas 1995, 156-58. On his status as a jester, see Tougher 2010, 140.

[10] For appraisals of Priscus as both a historian and stylist, see Baldwin 1980; Blockley 1981, 48-70; Treadgold 2007, 96-102; Given 2014, xiv-xx; Kim 2015, 128-30.

praised Priscus for his literary finesse,[11] his history does not survive intact, and must be reconstructed from quotations and summaries found in later compendia.[12]

For the story of Zerkōn, two compilations, both of them from the tenth century, are relevant. The first of these is the *Excerpta Historica* compiled from a range of earlier historical narratives at the behest of the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913-959). These include two collections of fragments relating to diplomatic exchanges, one describing embassies from the Romans to their neighbours (*Excerpta de legationibus Romanorum ad Gentes*), the other recounting exchanges travelling in the other direction (*Excerpta de legationibus gentium ad Romanos*). The long extract recording Priscus' journey to Attila's court occurs in the former, and its attribution to Priscus is not in doubt thanks to its autobiographical character.

The section on the banquet concludes with the following account of the entertainments provided for Attila's guests:

> (167) Since it was now evening, pine torches were lit. Two barbarians came and stood before Attila and chanted songs which they had composed, telling of his victories and his deeds of courage in war. The guests fixed their eyes on the singers: (168) some took pleasure in their verses, others recalling the wars became excited, while others, whose bodies were enfeebled by age and whose spirits were compelled to rest, were reduced to tears. (169) After the songs a Scythian whose mind was deranged came forward and, by uttering outlandish, unintelligible, and altogether crazy words, caused all to burst into laughter. After him, Zerkōn the *Maurousios*[13] entered. Edeco had persuaded him to come to Attila in order to recover his wife, whom he had been given in the country of the barbarians as a result of his great favour with Bleda, but whom he had left behind in Scythia when Attila sent him as a gift to Aëtius. But he was disappointed in his hopes, since Attila was angry that he had returned to his country. (170) Now, during the banquet, he came forward and by his appearance, his clothing, his voice, and the words which he spoke all jumbled together (for he mixed the Latin, Hunnic, and Gothic tongues) he put all in a good humour and caused all to burst into uncontrollable laughter – except Attila. (171) He remained unmoved with no change of expression and neither said nor did anything that hinted at laughter …[14]

The account concludes with Priscus' report of Attila's interactions with one of his sons, and a discussion between Priscus and another guest sitting near him.

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[11] Evagrius, *HE* 1.17.

[12] Blockley 1981, 113-23; Carolla 2008, xviii-xxviii; Given 2014, xx-xxxv.

[13] I have eschewed the customary translation, found in Blockley, Given and others, that renders him as Zerkōn «the Moor», since the English term «Moor» has negative associations, thanks to its application as a pejorative exonym to Muslims from north Africa and mediaeval al-Andalus. Μαυρούσιος, which is cognate with μαυρόω, has connotations of dark skin: Snowden 1970, 11-14; cf. Laes 2018, 56. On the vexed question of terminology relating to skin colour in Greek literature, see now Derbew 2022.

[14] Priscus, fr. 13.1 and 3, pp. 286-288 Blockley = fr. 8.167-181 Carolla. Translation adapted from Blockley with section numbers from Carolla.

In addition to this extract from the *Excerpta*, an account of Zerkōn appears in an entry in the tenth-century Byzantine lexicon known as the *Suda*. This comprises a list of headwords followed by quotations from various writers, providing explanations or examples of the use of each lemma.[15] The account of Zerkōn states:

> Zerkōn, the so-called Scythian, a *Maurousios* by origin (Μαυρούσιος τὸ γένος). On account of the deformity of his body and the laughter that his lisping voice and his general appearance caused – for he was rather short, hunchbacked, with deformed feet and a nose that, because of its excessive flatness, was indicated only by the nostrils – he was presented to Aspar, the son of Ardabur, when he was in Libya. Later, when the barbarians attached Thrace, he was captured and taken to the Scythian kings. Attila could not stand the sight of him, but Bleda was most pleased by him, not only when he was saying amusing things but even when he was not, because of the strange movements of his body as he walked. He accompanied Bleda both at feasts and on campaigns, and on these expeditions he wore a suit of armour made for amusing effect. Bleda thought so highly of him that when he ran off with some Roman prisoners, he ignored the rest but ordered him to be sought for with all diligence. When Zerkōn was recaptured and brought back in chains, Bleda burst out laughing at the sight of him, abated his anger, and asked the reason for his flight and why he thought life among the Romans was better than that amongst themselves. He answered that though his flight had been a crime, he had reason for his wrongdoing, in that he had not been given a wife. Bleda laughed even more and gave him a wife from one of the well-born attendants on the queen, who was no longer in service because of some misdemeanour. Thus he passed all his time with Bleda. After his death Attila gave Zerkōn as a gift to Aëtius the general of the western Romans, who sent him back to Aspar.[16]

We can be reasonably certain that this text from the *Suda* has its origins in Priscus, even if it is not explicitly ascribed to him: the compilers of the *Suda* certainly had access to Priscus and cite him by name in at least five entries (out of a total of more than 30,000).[17] First, the extracts in the *Excerpta* and the *Suda* share significant common details, notably Attila's dislike of Zerkōn and the story that Zerkōn had a Hunnic wife. Secondly, the entry in the *Suda* gives Zerkōn's background, a subject that likely would have interested Priscus, since he gives background details about other individuals he saw at Attila's court, such as an architect captured during a Hunnic raid on Sirmium who built a bathhouse for the Huns,[18] and a merchant from Viminacium, with whom Priscus has a philosophical debate about the relative

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[15] Wilson 1983, 145-147.

[16] Priscus, fr. 13.2, pp. 286-288 Blockley = fr. 11 Carolla = *Suda* Z 29. Translation adapted from Blockley.

[17] Details in Blockley 1981, 118; Given 2014, xxix-xxx.

[18] Priscus fr. 11.2, p. 264 Blockley = fr. 8.86 Carolla.

merits of Roman and barbarian government.[19] Thirdly, there are plausible thematic connections that link the unattributed details in the *Suda* with the extracts known to be from Priscus: Bleda's interrogation of Zerkōn about his preference for life among the Romans over that among the Huns mirrors the debate between Priscus and the merchant from Viminacium about the best form of government, while the story of his wish to have a Hunnic wife finds a significant echo in Priscus' report, in his account of the final feast with Attila, of the demands made by one of Attila's secretaries, Constantius, for a well-born Roman wife.[20]

Most importantly, the version in the *Excerpta* omits key details found in the *Suda* that, had they been included, would have made better sense of the story. Thus the *Excerpta* fragment explains that Zerkōn enjoyed great favour with Bleda; the *Suda*, however, offers more details about the nature of Bleda's favour, including his effort to recapture Zerkōn on the occasion of his escape. The version in the *Excerpta* mentions that Attila was unmoved by Zerkōn's performance; the details in the *Suda* show that this was not just Attila's reaction of the moment, but instead reflected the king's long-standing antipathy towards Zerkōn. Furthermore, the *Excerpta* omit any mention of Zerkōn's various disabilities, which makes it less easy to understand why he played the fool in front of the Huns after the feast and why «his appearance» (τῷ εἴδει) should be one of the factors that provoked hilarity among the dinner guests; the details from the *Suda*, however, make Zerkōn's behaviour readily comprehensible as a natural sequel to the display by the «deranged» Scythian that was similarly received with gales of laughter. Finally, the *Suda*'s peculiar designation of Zerkōn as a «so-called Scythian» (Σκύθης οὕτω καλούμενος), even though he was Μαυρούσιος, has been plausibly explained by Roger Blockley as a confusion arising from Priscus mentioning Zerkōn's entry immediately after mentioning a performance by the «deranged» Scythian.[21]

Accepting that the extract in the *Suda* comes from Priscus implies that the compilers of the *Excerpta* have omitted details in their rendering of Priscus' account that now only survive in the lexicon. That, however, is entirely in keeping with what we know of the methods used by Constantine Porphyrogenitus' compilers, and which can be observed in their treatment of authors like Procopius whose extant works can be compared with edited versions of them that appear in the *Excerpta*.[22] It is clear that the excerptors did not always copy verbatim, but omitted or summarised details they regarded as extraneous. In the case of Zerkōn, it seems the compilers of the *Excerpta* omitted the details about Zerkōn's background that are preserved only in the *Suda* because they were not felt to shed interesting light on the embassy under discussion in the wider excerpt. By contrast, the biographical details of the architect from Sirmium and the merchant from Viminacium were deemed to be sufficiently important because they provided information on the fate of former imperial subjects now living under Hunnic rule. It should be noted, moreover, that it is not just the *Excerpta* but also the version in the *Suda* that has been edited. It too omits details found in Priscus' original account, notably the detail that Zerkōn, having been sent to Aëtius by Attila and then dispatched by Aëtius back to Aspar, later returned to the Hunnic court to reclaim his wife.

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[19] Priscus fr. 11.2, pp. 266-272 Blockley = fr. 8.94-114 Carolla.

[20] Priscus fr. 14 Blockley = fr. 8.181-86 Carolla.

[21] Blockley 1983: 388 n. 81.

[22] Németh 2018, 77-87, on the excerptors' treatment of Procopius, *Bell. Pers.* 2.

Zerkōn's role in Priscus' narrative

Combining the details about Zerkōn from the *Excerpta* and the *Suda* offers an opportunity to consider how his characterisation functions in the wider narrative of the embassy to the Huns. At one level, Priscus' account of Zerkōn's adventures is plainly a piece of narrative colour used to enliven his narrative. The whole account of the embassy is replete with such features, and the early parts of the narrative expertly build a sense of dread as the envoys approach Naissus on the frontier, where they see a battlefield strewn with bones of the dead and a city lying in ruins; on leaving the city the next morning, they get so lost in a forest that they do not know if they are travelling east or west, with the result that when the sun rises in front of them they think that it is rising in the west and that the laws of nature have been upended.[23] On crossing into Hunnic territory, they find their unease increases as they are commanded by Attila's retainers not to camp on ground at a higher elevation than Attila's tent.[24] An early encounter with the king does not go well, when he threatens to impale one of the envoys, Vigilas.[25] (On the return leg of their journey, the ambassadors would witness a number of such impalings.[26]) At another point, the ambassadors are unnerved by a sudden storm that overtakes their encampment.[27] Throughout the account, periodic remarks about the Huns idiosyncratic habits (their dugout canoes and foodstuffs, their offering of attractive women for intercourse with the envoys) and the unfamiliarity of the land they inhabited reinforce the pervading sense of strangeness.[28]

Moreover, Priscus' description of Zerkōn's disability as a subject for mockery conforms to ancient stereotypes, however distasteful we find it. A particularly famous victim of such ridicule was the fabulist Aesop, the story of whose brutal treatment was reiterated in late antiquity both in a biographical novel and in a speech by the orator Himerius.[29] Indeed, Priscus' own account shows that such derision was not reserved for Zerkōn alone: there is also the laughter of the Huns at the unfortunate Scythian who spoke gibberish.

Yet the depiction of Zerkōn may have a more serious purpose, one that is revealed in Attila's refusal to laugh at him. A striking feature of Priscus' depiction of Attila's conduct at the banquet is its emphasis on the Hunnic king's restrained behaviour. While his courtiers dress extravagantly and eat from silver platters and drink from gold and silver goblets, Attila himself was dressed in unembellished clothes, had his food served to him on a wooden plate, and drank his wine from a wooden cup.[30] In other words, Attila is presented through tropes that stress his frugality. That this could be connected to his distaste for Zerkōn as an object of amusement is

[23] Priscus, fr. 11.2, p. 248 Blockley = fr. 8.13-16 Carolla.

[24] Priscus, fr. 11.2, p. 250 Blockley = fr. 8.22 Carolla.

[25] Priscus, fr. 11.2, p. 254 Blockley = fr. 8.44 Carolla.

[26] Priscus, fr. 14, p. 292 Blockley = fr. 8.189-190 Carolla.

[27] Priscus, fr. 11.2, p. 260 Blockley = fr. 8.67-71 Carolla.

[28] On these aspects, see Carolla 2019.

[29] Novel: Laes 2018, 118, 137; cf. Himerius, *Oration* 46.4.

[30] Priscus, fr. 14, p. 292 Blockley = fr. 8.189-190 Carolla; but cf. Baldwin 1980, 43.

perhaps suggested by comparison with the depiction of another ruler who combined these attitudes: in his account of the emperor Augustus, Suetonius notes that he both preferred simple, ordinary food and «abhorred dwarfs, cripples, and everything of that sort, as freaks of nature and of ill omen.»[31] A little earlier than Suetonius, Plutarch deplored the proclivity of certain individuals at Rome who eschewed conventional forms of beauty found in paintings, statues, and even male and female slaves on sale and instead «haunt the monster-market (περὶ τὴν τῶν τεράτων ἀγορὰν), examining those who have no calves, or are weasel-armed, or have three eyes, or ostrich-heads, and searching to learn whether there has been born some 'commingled shape and misformed prodigy'.»[32] Closer in time to Priscus, the *Historia Augusta* contends that the gathering of such unfortunate humans for the purposes of ridicule was the tasteless action of a tyrant: thus the despotic Elagabalus (218-222) was a cruel collector of human misfortune, while his milder his successor Alexander Severus (222-235) was tasked with dispersing his predecessor's collection.[33]

These aspects of Priscus' portrayal of Attila are consonant with other aspects of his narrative, in which Attila's vigour is contrasted with the supine conduct in foreign policy of Theodosius II.[34] In general, Theodosius is a much less prominent personality in the surviving fragments than Attila: the emperor is usually glimpsed only behind a façade of courtiers who do his bidding, while Attila often appears taking active control of the military and diplomatic situation, as is the case in the account of the embassy of 449. If a fragment of John of Antioch (echoed in the *Suda*) can be ascribed to Priscus, then he was not shy about describing the emperor as unwarlike, cowardly, and the creature of his court eunuchs.[35] The preference of Theodosius' government for diplomacy over warfare with the Huns was such that elsewhere Priscus could describe Attila as the Romans' «master» (δεσπότης), whose bidding the Romans had no option but to follow.[36] Priscus also notes that meeting the demands of payments to the Huns presented a difficulty for Theodosius' administration because so much had been squandered already on «disgusting spectacles, unreasonable displays of generosity, pleasures, and dissolute banquets, such as no right-minded person would participate in, even when things were going well.»[37] This stands in stark contrast to the restrained conduct of Attila at his feast, if not necessarily to that of the rest of the Huns.

Within the account of the embassy, this counterpoint finds its most striking articulation in the debate between Priscus and the merchant from Viminacium on the respective merits of Roman and Hunnic government. While the merchant begins from a position that life is better under the Huns, Priscus leads him to admit that the Roman polity is essentially preferable; but in a pointed jibe at Theodosius' government, the merchant comments that the rulers of the

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[31] Suet., *Aug.* 76.1 (food), 83 («freaks»), Loeb translation.

[32] Plut., *De cur*. 520C, quoting Eur., fr. 996. Loeb translation.

[33] *HA Heliogab.* 29.3; *HA Alex. Sev*. 34.2-3.

[34] For Priscus' refusal to depict the Huns straightforwardly as stereotypical barbarians: Maas 1995: 148.

[35] Priscus fr. 3.1-2, pp. 226-228 Blockley = frr 51-52 Carolla.

[36] Priscus fr. 10, p. 242 Blockley = fr. 6.4 Carolla.

[37] Priscus fr. 9.3, p. 236 Blockley = fr. 5.5 Carolla. Translation Blockley.

Empire in his own day were not guided by the solid principles of old.[38] Viewed in this light, Zerkōn was not merely a colourful, incidental detail at Attila's banquet; rather, his inclusion enabled Priscus to make points about Attila that were consonant with his carefully wrought description of the Huns in the context of their dealings with Theodosius.[39]

Zerkōn's extraordinary adventures: diplomacy and historical geography

The life history of Zerkōn offered in Priscus' fragments is remarkable for its detail. Zerkōn first appears in 431 when the eastern general Aspar was commanding forces against the Vandals in north Africa as part of a joint eastern and western imperial offensive.[40] In the course of this campaign, Aspar was offered (by whom we are not told) Zerkōn as a gift. His distinctive physical appearance likely explains why he was given (see below). Following the Vandal war, Aspar returned to Constantinople, where he would be honoured with a consulship in 434.[41] He must have brought Zerkōn back with him, as this is the only plausible context for the next known episode in Zerkōn's life: his capture by the Huns during an invasion of Thrace. This is known to have occurred in 441,[42] and once more Aspar was appointed to command imperial forces. Zerkōn's capture could imply that he was in Aspar's entourage.

As a captive, Zerkōn came into the orbit of Bleda, half-brother to Attila and co-ruler of the Huns. Priscus describes a relationship characterised on Bleda's side by a combination of affection and ridicule. Zerkōn's perception of the relationship is more difficult to ascertain, though his attempt to escape and his demand for a wife suggest that he was not entirely satisfied with his lot. At Zerkōn's recapture, Bleda arranged for him to be married to a lady of the royal court, but this may not have been motivated entirely, or even at all, by kindness. Zerkōn's bride had recently suffered some minor disgrace; perhaps both he and the lady were actually being punished in some way.

Following Bleda's death in *c.* 445, Zerkōn's fortunes changed, and his travels began anew. Attila offered him as a gift to the western *magister militum*, Flavius Aëtius.[43] The context for this is clear enough. Aëtius had long standing connections with the Huns, having sought their support for the western usurper Johannes in 425.[44] In 449, Aëtius was involved in delicate diplomatic manoeuvres with Attila, sending to him an embassy under the *comes* Romulus.[45] It is worth noting that one of Attila's secretaries at this time, Constantius, had also been sent to him by Aëtius.[46] The dispatch of Zerkōn was perhaps a reciprocal act to reinforce the diplomatic understanding between the king and the general. How long Zerkōn spent with

[38] Blockley Fr. 11.2, p. 272 Blockley = fr. 8.114 Carolla. On this episode, Maas 2015, 149-54.
[39] On Priscus' sophistication: Maas 1995, 148-149.
[40] For context, see Wijnendaele 2014: 94-6.
[41] PLRE 2.164-69 (Aspar), at 166.
[42] Marc. Com., *Chron.* s.a. 441.
[43] PLRE 2.21-29 (Aetius 7).
[44] Prosper, *Chronicon* c. 1288 (s.a. 425).
[45] PLRE 2.949 (Romulus 2).
[46] PLRE 2.319 (Constantius 7). On such figures, see Lenski 2014, 240.

Aëtius is unknown, but the fact he was sent back to Aspar, Aëtius' opposite number in the east as *magister militum*, hints at another aspect of diplomacy at this period: that between the eastern and western Empires.[47] When exactly Zerkōn returned to Attila's court is not known, but Priscus' mention that he was persuaded to come back to Attila by Edeco could imply that he returned to the Hunnic court in the context of the embassy of 449 itself – although it is curious that Priscus' detailed account of the embassy makes no mention of him until Attila's feast. Once again, however, Zerkōn functions as an object for exchange in diplomatic negotiations.

Indeed, it is not least as a source for diplomatic practice that Priscus' account of Zerkōn's biography is interesting. It is clear that Zerkōn was prized as a high-status gift useful in diplomatic contexts. He was offered as a gift (ἐδεδώρητο) to Aspar in Libya; Attila later gave him as a gift to Aëtius (δῶρον τὸν Ζέρκωνα δίδωσιν); and finally Aëtius returned him to Aspar. The attentions lavished upon him by Bleda point similarly to a figure who was somehow valued, even if only as property. In this respect, Zerkōn was not entirely an isolated example. A century earlier, the emperor Julian, during his invasion of Persia, had claimed as booty «a dumb boy who was offered to him, who was acquainted with sign-language and explained many things in which he was skilled by most graceful gestures».[48]

It is also worth commenting on Zerkōn's remarkable mobility, even if, apart from his escape bid, he had little autonomy.[49] Here we have a figure who travels from his African homeland to Constantinople and Thrace, from there to the Hunnic Empire in central Europe, then to the western provinces, back to Constantinople, and at last back to Attila's court. That is a remarkable set of journeys for two reasons. The first relates to the territorial integrity of the Roman Empire in the mid-fifth century. Although the Empire still claimed to be united under the twin rule of the emperors Theodosius II in the east and Valentinian III in the west, and although the east on several occasions sent assistance to the west to alleviate its troubles (this was precisely why Aspar was in Africa at the time Zerkōn came into his possession), the 440s had seen a serious rupture in that unity as a consequence of Hunnic encroachment on the middle Danube frontier.[50] It is one of the striking features of Priscus' account of his visit to Attila's court that when he and his fellow envoys got there, they found themselves rubbing shoulders with a separate embassy that had been sent from the western Romans.[51]

The second factor that makes Zerkōn's journeys remarkable is that few individuals are likely to have seen much more of the world than the communities in which they grew up: consider the anecdote related by the philosopher-bishop Synesius of Cyrene about a local peasant who was so ill-informed about the outside world that he assumed its ruler was still Agamemnon.[52] While some private individuals with sufficient wealth or patronage might travel

[47] Gillett 2003, 7, 223-224.

[48] Amm. Marc. 24.4.26; Laes 2018, 119.

[49] For Zerkōn as an outsider with limited autonomy, see Maas 1995, 157.

[50] Humphries 2023, 80-82.

[51] Priscus fr. 11.2, p. 262 Blockley = fr. 8.75 Carolla; Baldwin 1980, 22, proposes a concerted effort by the *partes*; but the assessment of Lenski 2014, 230-231, that the embassies reflect independent polices, seems more plausible.

[52] Synesius, *Ep.* 148.

far across the Empire to undertake pilgrimages or pursue advanced studies, the majority of people who travelled long distances did so either because their professions, such as merchants, demanded it, or at the behest of the Roman state, either as troops or bureaucrats. Zerkōn was neither a merchant nor a soldier nor a civil servant; but he *was* regarded as valuable, and his remarkable travels originated from his position as a status symbol in diplomatic exchanges. It had been for this reason that he had been gifted to Aspar, treasured by Bleda, and dispatched by Attila to Aëtius; and it is reasonable to guess that similar considerations underpinned his return by Aëtius to Aspar. This, then, adds to Zerkōn's litany of misfortunes the fact that he was handed around as if he were a high-status possession.

After his brief but striking appearance at the end of Attila's banquet, Zerkōn's story comes to an abrupt end. What happened to him afterwards is wholly unknown. Did he remain among the Huns and reclaim his wife? Or did he return with Maximinus and Priscus to rejoin Aspar's entourage at Constantinople? We do not know: instead, he disappears from view while the Huns, except for Attila, are still laughing at him. It might be noted that his presence in a fragmentary text means that certain aspects of his story may have been curtailed: after all, the *Suda*'s brief narrative leaves him in Aspar's company after Aëtius had sent him back to the east, and leaves out entirely Zerkōn's return to Attila's court to reclaim his wife. Even in the parts of Priscus' account preserved in the *Excerpta*, Zerkōn's story is recounted briefly. Yet for all its brevity, the tale presents to us a remarkable individual who found himself cast about in the tumults of the fifth century, and who, in spite of his humble origins and physical disadvantages (or perhaps because of these latter), found himself in close proximity to some of the leading powerbrokers of the period, and whose extraordinary adventures across two halves of the Empire and beyond the frontier were striking enough to compel Priscus to commit them to his narrative.[53]

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