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A Note on the Barbarian Raids in Macedonia from the Fourth to the Century AD: The Material Evidence from Stobi

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This article is dedicated to Stobi and the barbarian raids of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. As one of the richest and most prosperous cities in the Central Balkans, Stobi was a favourite target for the various barbarian tribes that raided the Balkans between the fourth and sixth centuries. Layers of destruction and the material from these layers attest to continuous raids. Such material ranges from coins and dress fittings to weapons and other evidence of warfare. The material will be presented in chronological fashion and an attempt will be made to attribute certain material, albeit not exclusively, to specific barbarian tribes. A brief timeline for the period between the fourth and the sixth century will be presented so as to provide a specific context for the artifacts. The events highlighted in this timeline would later have a strong influence on the Early Middle Ages in the Balkans.

During the rule of Diocletian (284-305), the Balkans witnessed the attacks of the Goths.¹ They would remain an intermittent threat until the second half of the fifth century when Theodoric settled the Ostrogoths in Italy. The raids of the Goths were part of a wider 'domino effect' following from the Huns' crossing of the Volga River and breaking into Gothic territory in c. 375. This forced the Goths to cross the Danube and seek refuge in Byzantine territory. The Goths stayed for almost a century, first attacking the Empire and later serving as *foederati*.² The Huns would remain a threat to the Empire until the fifth century when Hunnish domination of the Balkans began.

In 378, the Goths and the imperial Roman army clashed at Adrianople in Thrace. The battle resulted in the defeat of the imperial army and the death of Emperor Valens. His successor, Theodosius, made allies of the Goths by settling the Ostrogoths in Illyricum and the Visigoths in Thrace.³

After the division of the Empire in 395, the provinces south of the Danube were raided by barbarian tribes situated along the Danube *limes*: the Sarmatians, Quadi, Alani, Vandals, Marcomanni and Huns.⁴ This was the first appearance of the Huns on the Danube frontier and thereafter they were to pose a grave and persistent

1 Fine, 1991: 13.

2 For a general history of the Goths, see Hochmann, 1971; Heather & Matthews, 1991; Vasilev, 1936; Wolfram, 1987; Burns, 1984; Barnish & Marazzi, 2007; Heather, 1995: 145-173; Thompson, 1966. For more about the Goths in the Balkans and their relationship with Byzantium, see Зечевић, 2002: 205-207.

3 Treadgold, 1996:11.

4 Ковачевић, 1977: 32.

threat to the Byzantine Empire. The first half of the fifth century saw the domination of the Huns. They were militarily trained in techniques and weapons never before seen by the Romans, as well as being experienced in breaching fortifications and waging siege warfare.⁵

The Hunnic federation reached its peak under the rule of Attila, when raids were launched on the rich Balkan towns and cities. The raid of 447, led by Attila himself, is reported by contemporary sources to have destroyed no less than 70 cities:⁶ Sirmium, Singidunum, Viminacium, Serdica, Naissus, Philippopolis, Margus and Ratiaria were all sacked, as well as Stobi, the capital of Macedonia Secunda.⁷ Other cities in Macedonia probably suffered, but Stobi is the only site where this raid has been archaeologically confirmed to date.

The Hunnish domination of the Balkans lasted until 450, when their raiding activities shifted to the west. These later raids were not as successful as those undertaken in the Balkans. Attila himself was defeated in Gaul and perished in 453.⁸ After his death, the Hunnic Empire was obliterated by a coalition led by King Ardaric of the Gepids, and the Huns henceforth had no further influence on the military situation in the Balkans.⁹ The military and political vacuum created by the dispersion of Hunnish domination was exploited by the Goths. The Goths claimed the territory north of Stara Planina and launched raids from there on Greece, Thrace, Thessaly and Macedonia, reaching almost the hinterland of the Capital itself.¹⁰ The first attempt to deal with this threat, conducted by Emperors Leo and Zeno, succeeded in fuelling conflicts between the Ostrogoths and the Visigoths, but proved to be of no long-term avail. In 479, Zeno offered Theodoric the opportunity to settle his Ostrogoths in Dardania in the vicinity of present-day Pautalia.¹¹ Theodoric accepted the offer, but the raids continued. Once again the big cities were targeted: Heraclea Lynkestis and Epidamnos were evacuated and the people of Thessalonica defended their city themselves.¹²

The Byzantine Empire re-established its authority in the Balkans after the Ostrogoths moved to Italy in 489. Again, this was in line with the imperial Byzantine policy of playing one barbarian tribe off against another. Since 476, Odoacer had ruled the West under the nominal authority of Zeno. Theodoric was sent to reclaim the territories of the former Western Empire for Byzantium. But this policy backfired on the Byzantine Empire and Theodoric formed a kingdom of his own with its capital in Ravenna and including parts of the Western Balkans, Istria, Dalmatia and part of Pannonia. Although the Ostrogothic kingdom would later result in other conflicts and wars, its formation removed the Gothic presence from the Balkans and the threat they

⁵ Whitby, 1988: 67.

⁶ Ковачевић, 1977: 32.

⁷ On the excavations in Stobi and the artifacts that may be connected with the incursions of the people of the *Barbaricum*, see Wiseman & Mano-Zissi, 1974: 117-148; Санев & Саржоски, 1981: 229-234; Микулчиќ, 1981: 210-226. For the numismatic materials possibly kept as a result of the military activities, see Hadži-Maneva, 2001: 69-81; Hadži-Maneva & Ivanišević, 2003: 119-140; Винчиќ & Хаџи-Манева, 2000: 55-76. To trace the barbarian raids through numismatic materials, beginning in the Danubian *limes* area and moving southward, see: Metcalf, 1991: 140-148; Duncan, 1993: 55-76; and Popović, 1980: 240-244.

⁸ Whitby, 1988: 68

⁹ Kovačević, 1977: 32.

¹⁰ Whitby, 1988: 68

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*: 69

posed to the Empire.¹³

The end of the fifth century was a stable period, especially by comparison with its tumultuous beginnings.¹⁴ But the sixth century brought great changes and the Empire had to deal with new dangers from two different groups: the Avars, belligerent horsemen from the steppes, and the less pugnacious yet omnipresent Slavs. The earliest written records regarding the Slavs locate them north of the Danube.¹⁵ They raided Thrace and Macedonia and penetrated Greece as far south as Corinth. According to contemporary written sources, the raids of the Slavs became an annual occurrence from the middle of the sixth century.¹⁶ The Slavic invaders were very mobile, lightly armed and did not have knowledge of effectively breaching fortifications. At this period, the Slavs were mere raiders, but not settlers on Byzantine territory. The settlement of the Slavs was probably caused by the formation of the First Avar Kaganate in Pannonia.¹⁷ A part of the Slavic population moved south and settled on Byzantine territory as *foederati*,¹⁸ but the majority were incorporated within the Avar federation.

The Avars emerged into Europe fleeing from the Turkish federation which was expanding in the mid-sixth century.¹⁹ The Avars conquered the tribes living around the Black Sea, including the Kutrigurs.²⁰ Militarily, the Avars were quite the opposite of the Slavs: although their units were also very mobile and lightly equipped, their weapons and training were far superior. They were experienced horsemen and persistent enough to besiege fortified cities. The Avar Khagans ruled a large conglomerate of people, having subdued part of the Slavs, the Proto-Bulgarians and the remnants of the Huns.²¹ The Slavs were superior to the Avar horsemen in building and using boats and played a major role in crossing the Danube and besieging port cities.²²

The Avars gained a foothold in the Balkans by intervening in disputes between the Gepids and the Lombards. The Gepids had taken over the lands vacated by the departure of the Ostrogoths to Italy and the Lombards laid claim to the same territory. The alliance of the Lombard king Alboin and the Avar Khagan Baján in 566-567 brought the Avars into Pannonia.²³ Sirmium finally fell under Avar control in 582, the same year that Maurice became Emperor. The loss of Sirmium meant the loss of imperial control over Pannonia, and also the loss of an important strategic base in controlling the Danubian *limes*.²⁴ After the Lombards had withdrawn to Italy, the Avars were the sole masters of Pannonia. It was there they built their federation under

13 Fine, 1991:22.

14 In the reign of Anastasius (491-518), the already weakened Empire went to war with Persia. Reforms were more than necessary to overcome this new threat. The reform of the monetary system increased the value of soldiers' salaries and attracted many native inhabitants to enlist, thus decreasing the proportion of barbarians in the imperial army (see Grierson, 1982: 4). The conflict with Persia would be resolved during the reign of Justinian.

15 Fine, 1991: 25.

16 *Ibid.*: 28

17 Treadgold, 1996: 15.

18 Fine, 1991: 29.

19 Whitby, 1988: 85. On the origin of the Avars, see Kovačević, 1977: 11-24. Kovačević dedicates a whole chapter to the origin of various nomadic peoples in Asia, including the Avars. He also refers to the mentions of these tribes in Chinese accounts, which are of great importance for the reconstruction of the pre-European phase of the nomadic tribes. See also, Vida, 2003: 305-326.

20 Whitby, 1988: 85.

21 Fine, 1991:30.

22 Whitby, 1988: 68.

23 Ковачевић, 1977: 40.

24 Fine, 1991:30.

the rule of a Khagan.

The period of the First Avar Khaganate (568-626)²⁵ marked the peak of Avar power and the period of the most severe raids. Invasions into the central Balkan region most commonly followed the Morava-Vardar route. These raids are well documented by archaeological material in the territory of present-day Macedonia. The final aim of most of these raids was Constantinople, or—as the next best aim—Thessalonica. Two years after the conquest of Sirmium, an army of 5,000 Slavic warriors under the command of the Khagan reached the Long Walls of Constantinople.²⁶ Unable to conquer the capital, the Slavs turned the focus of the raid to Thessalonica, but this also ended in failure.²⁷

In 584 the Avars conquered Singidunum. Two years later, another siege of Thessalonica followed, but did not last long due to the outbreak of plague and famine in the barbarian camp.²⁸ This siege was followed by intense raiding activity in the provinces of Dardania, Macedonia Prima, Macedonia Secunda, and others. This was the year in which urban life ended in the cities of Heraclea Lyncestis,²⁹ Bargala,³⁰ and Stobi,³¹ and from which a destruction layer is documented in the fortress of Markovo Kale³² near present-day Skopje. The same raid has been documented and coin-dated in two fortifications in the area of the present-day city of Prilep.³³

The raids of the Avaro-Slavic army continued up to 591 when Emperor Maurice made peace with the Persians and thus enabled the transfer of substantial troops to the Balkans. Singidunum was re-conquered and the Avars and Slavs were forced back behind the old Danube frontier. In 593 and 596, however, the Avars besieged Singidunum again. In 599, the Avars broke the Byzantine defence on the *limes* and

25 The First (or Great) Avar Khaganate lasted from 568 to 626, the Second Khaganate from 626 to 811. The chronological framework of the Khaganates is given in Ковачевић, 1977: 11. Since the chronological framework goes up to the sixth century, I will focus only on the events of the First Avar Khaganate.

26 Whitby, 1988: 90.

27 Ковачевић, 1977: 54; Баришић, 1995: 175.

28 Ковачевић, 1977: 57; Баришић, 1995: 176-184.

29 On the excavations in Heraclea Lyncestis and the archaeological material that can be connected with the barbarian invasions, see Манева, 1983-84: 175-186; Манева, 1985/86/87: 49-59; Манева, 1988: 45-49; Манева, 1989: 161-181. One of the most exclusive finds of the Early Middle Ages in Macedonia, a *Baldenheim* helmet, was found on this site. It was probably worn by a very high-ranking officer of the Byzantine army defending the city. See more in Манева, 1986: 71-88 and Манева, 2001, 83-90.

30 Алексова, 1989 and Алексова, 2001: 96-97.

31 Regarding the excavations in Stobi and the archaeological material that can be connected with the barbarian invasions, see Wiseman & Mano-Zissi, 1974: 117-148; Санев & Саржоски, 1981: 229-234; Микулчиќ, 1981: 210-226. For the numismatic materials possibly deposited as a result of the military activities, see Hadži-Maneva, 2001: 69-81; Hadži-Maneva & Ivanišević, 2003: 119-140; Винчиќ & Хаџи-Манева, 2000: 55-76. To trace the barbarian raids via numismatic materials, beginning in the Danubian *limes* area and moving southward, see: Metcalf, 1991: 140-148; Duncan, 1993: 55-76; and Popović, 1980: 240-244.

32 In the late fifth century and the beginning of the sixth century, around 400 fortifications were renovated or built on the territory of present-day Macedonia as greater protection from barbarian raids. See Mikulčić, 2002: 190-195. The fortified city at Markovi Kuli was one of the newly built fortifications. It was built on three levelled terraces, with internal walls between them, all surrounded by a strong fortification built in the *emplekton* technique. The fortification had 40 or more towers with triangular or pentagonal bases. The highest terrace was the acropolis of the town where the workshop was found. For more information about this fortification and the excavations undertaken there, see Микулчиќ, 1982: 50; Микулчиќ & Никуљска, 1979: 65-74; Микулчиќ & Никуљска, 1983: 123-133; and Микулчиќ & Билбија, 1987: 205-220.

33 Occupation of these two fortresses on the sites of Baba and Selce ended in 586. The last coins found there belong to the 585-586 issue.

reached the Long Walls of Constantinople before plague struck the Avar camp and neutralized the attack. In 600, Emperor Maurice re-conquered Sirmium and thus re-established the old Danube frontier. This was secured in a treaty by which the Avars were paid an annual tribute and undertook not to raid the Empire. Emperor Maurice then broke the treaty the following year by sending armies across the Danube.³⁴

Although Maurice's campaign almost destroyed them, the Avars seem to have recovered their forces rapidly. The importance of the Danube limes as a defense was lost and the reign of the Emperors Phocas and Heraclius saw further Avar raids. Later, the Avars shifted their raids to the west and parts of modern-day Bosnia, Croatia and Dalmatia.³⁵ Salona was conquered between 619 and 626.³⁶ In 617 or 618, Thessalonica was again besieged and once more saved by its impregnable fortifications. A novelty of this raid was that it was executed by Slavic tribes concentrated in the vicinity of Thessalonica who invited the Avar Khagan to participate with them in the siege as allies on equal terms.³⁷ Several Slavic tribes had already settled, yet some were still part of the Avar federation.

The Avar siege of Constantinople in 626 was again unsuccessful. This date is important because from this point onwards the First Avar Khaganate began to disintegrate and the Avars started to lose their domination in the Balkans. Although the Avars weakened their power with every failed siege, the Empire still perceived them as a threat. A great number of fortifications built and re-built under Justinian in the territory of modern-day Macedonia were still in use, as attested to by the archaeological material from these sites.³⁸

The failed siege of Constantinople was followed by a rebellion in the Avar ranks, resulting in open battles in 629. Around 635, the Bulgars led by Kubrat were released from the Avar federation, decimating the great army of the Avar tribal federation.³⁹ In this period and later, the Balkans were of secondary importance for the Avars whose primary aim was to expand westward.⁴⁰

All these raids are known from written sources and confirmed by archaeological material from the destruction layers in Stobi. The objects found range from coins to military insignia and weapons, most of which can be linked to specific raids by specific barbarian armies and all of which attest to intense military activity.

Stobi had developed rapidly after the Roman conquest of 167 BCE, becoming dominant in the salt trade and gaining the status of *municipium*. It was a rich city with several basilicas, a theatre, luxurious palaces, its own coin mint and other public and private buildings. Stobi was later to be the site of an important archbishopric: the Archbishop of Stobi was recorded as being present at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.⁴¹

34 Fine, 1991: 32-33.

35 *Ibid.*: 34

36 Curta, 2006: 74

37 Curta, 2001: 108.

38 Jarić, 2010: 30-46.

39 On the achievements of Kubrat and his successors, see Fine, 1991: 43; Баришић, 1995: 213 and Ковачевић, 1997: 88.

40 This expansion ended with the Avar-Frankish war of 791-805, after which the western parts of the Khaganate were controlled by the Frankish Empire while the eastern territory was fought over by the newly established Bulgars and the Byzantine Empire. The Avars would appear in the Balkans twice again, in 811 and 814, though this time as mere mercenaries of the Bulgar Khan Krum. See Fine, 1991: 90-94.

41 *Ibid.*: 237.

Luxury and other displays of prestige were appreciated by the citizens of Stobi, but safety came first and the city was transformed to meet the needs of the periods of turmoil. Some of the luxurious buildings fell out of use; fortifications were built over buildings decorated with mosaics. In the building named *Casa Romana*, a strong defensive wall was built directly onto the mosaic floor. Of the many coins found near the base of the wall, the latest was minted by Arcadius (383-393). This building project is probably connected with the Gothic invasion at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries.⁴² A coin-hoard found in the theatre is also probably connected with the Gothic raids. This hoard contained around 70 *siliquae* and 4 *solidi*, minted by Valentinian I, Valens, Gratian and Valentinian II. The coins of this hoard were issued in the period between 364 and 378.⁴³ Based on this short time period, it can be deduced that they were probably not hidden as long-term savings but coins withdrawn from circulation, deposited and never retrieved. Most of the coins had been issued by the mint at Antioch and are thus unrepresentative of the coins in circulation in this area at this time, the majority of which were issued from the active mint of Thessalonica. This introduces the possibility that these coins were brought into Stobi, probably from the Orient prefecture.⁴⁴ Regardless of their provenance, this hoard speaks of the Gothic threat in the late fourth and early fifth century in the Central Balkans, as does another hoard of fourth-century bronze coins found in the theatre that are chronologically similar to this Antioch hoard.⁴⁵

After the Gothic danger had passed, Stobi was probably attacked by Huns in the middle of the fifth century and the archeological material attests to considerable destruction by fire. The presence of nomadic barbarians in Stobi is indicated by the remains of a reflex bow and a three-ribbed arrowhead found in the *Domus Fullonica* building complex. The burnt reflex bow was found together with a dagger in Ward 21 and the arrowhead was found in Ward 28. The destruction layer contained an abundance of coins, the latest dating to the reigns of Theodosius II and Valentinian III. The coins were minted in 450 or 455, respectively. The renewal phase of the building complex is dated with the coins of Marcian (450-457) and Leo I (457-474), so the *terminus ante quem* of the destruction layer can be set at 450.⁴⁶ Two other three-ribbed arrowheads were found in Stobi, also from layers of a similar date.⁴⁷ These weapons of nomadic horsemen, together with the dates of the coins, indicate that this destruction layer may have been due to Attila's attack of 447 in which no less than seventy large urban centers in the Balkans were destroyed.

A strong coalition lead by Ardaric-King of the Gepids ended the Hunnish

42 Санев и Саржоски, 1981: 229-243.

43 Hadži-Maneva, 2001: 69-70.

44 The mint of Antioch was meant to supply the Orient Prefecture with coins. Hoards with coins from a narrow period of time and well-preserved coins originating from non-local mints may indicate a military presence—a soldier's pay, for example, brought by a soldier who came to Stobi from the Orient Prefecture. This is only my suggestion in interpreting such finds; nevertheless, Hadži-Maneva (Hadži-Maneva, 2001:75 and Hadži-Maneva and Ivanišević, 2003: 119-140 notes that *solidi* and *siliquae* are rare in the territory of the Byzantine Empire, with the exception of present-day Romania where the majority of hoards of *siliquae* have been found. For more information on hoards from Romania, see Duncan, 1993: 353-354. For more information on the circulation of Early Byzantine coins in the province of Macedonia Secunda, see Котовчевска, 2006.

45 Винчиќ и Хаџи-Манева, 2000: 55-76

46 Микулчиќ, 1981:210.

47 *Ibid.*: 210. For similar finds from Heraclea Lynkestis, see Манева, 1985/86/87: 49-59

domination of the Balkas, after the death of Attila in 453.⁴⁸ As evidenced by the written sources, Stobi was raided by the Ostrogoths during their campaign in the prefecture of Illyricum on two occasions: once in 472 and again in 479.⁴⁹ In 489, Theodoric's Ostrogoths moved to Italy and Byzantine authority was reasserted in the Balkans, though not for long.

The beginning of the 6th century saw the rise of the Avar tribal federation and intense Avar-Slavic raids. As a measure to increase military protection, Byzantine troops were concentrated in the cities. Several items from the personal equipment of Byzantine soldiers have been found in Stobi: two belt buckles of the 'Sucidava' type and one fibula with a plate-shaped leg. The latter was found in the *Domus Fullonica* building complex. The stratigraphic layer above contained a coin of Justin I (518-527).⁵⁰

All these artifacts expanded in use during the sixth century and may offer some small indication of the presence of Byzantine troops during the same century. Besides weapons and military insignia, the coin hoards are also strong evidence of military activity. In one of the northern rooms of the *Casino Basilica*, a coin hoard has been found in which the latest minted coins is dated to 585.⁵¹ This coin hoard is probably connected with the Avar-Slavic plundering of the Balkan provinces before the siege of Constantinople in 586.

This chronological review of artifacts that may be connected with military activity on the part of various barbarian groups and Byzantine troops offers a small glimpse into the history of Stobi and how the city survived and changed during the perilous times of the barbarian invasions in the Early Middle Ages.

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48 Ковачевић, 1977: 32.

49 Папазоглу, 1957: 192-193.

50 For further elaboration, dating and illustration of such finds see Jarić, 2010: 35 (Table 1 and Figure 4) and 43 (Table 4 and Figure 4).

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Резиме:

Прилог за варварските напади на Македонија од IV до VI век,
со осврт на археолошкиот материјал од Стоби

Овој текст е посветен на Стоби и на варварските напади од доцната антика и раниот Среден век. Како еден од најбогатите и просперитетни градови на Централен Балкан, Стоби бил омилена мета на нападите на разните варварски племиња кои напаѓале на Балканот во периодот меѓу IV и VI век. Стратиграфските слоеви со девастација и материјалот кој потекнува од нив, сведочи за континуираните напади на Стоби. Археолошкиот материјал е разновиден, се движи од монети до апликацкии за облека, како и оружје. Материјалот ќе биде претставен хронолошки и ќе биде направен обид да се атрибуира одреден материјал, иако не ексклузивно, со одредено варварско племе. Истотака, ќе биде претставен краток историјат на поважните политички и воени настани на Балканот, за да се овозможи поконкретен контекст за археолошкиот материјал.

Преку освртот на археолошкиот материјал од Стоби кој може да се поврзе со готските, хунските и аваро-словенските напади, ќе се создаде појасна слика за ситуацијата на големите урбани центри на Балканот и влијанието што го имале континуираните варварски напади врз нивниот развој и процут.

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