

*The Barbarian Incursions on Macedonia
in the Early Middle Ages:
Defining Chronology, Geography and Factors*

Jelena JARIĆ

Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Faculty of Philosophy
Skopje, Macedonia

In a chronological and geographical sense, this article focuses on the military actions in Macedonia during the Early Middle Ages. This area was a cross-road of routes connecting the East and the West, a link between two utterly different worlds – the *Barbaricum* and the Byzantine Empire, and more often than not, the stage of war where these two worlds collided. A better understanding of the geography of the region, the chain of events that took place and the factors that triggered and facilitated them will lead to a better understanding of the military history, as well as the mutual influence between the *Romaioi* and the *barbaroi* on many levels.

Due to its location, the territory of modern-day Macedonia was inevitably involved in the battles between the barbarians and the Byzantine Empire. During the Early Middle Ages, this territory was divided into several administrative units. The administrative division of the provinces will be elaborated further in this text. The chronology follows the general timeline of the Byzantine Empire, limited as much as possible to the military events that are crucial solely for Macedonia and the Balkans. Yet, it is not possible to observe these events as isolated cases and not set in a wider pattern, and for that reason the events that influenced the military history of this region, albeit in an indirect manner, are also discussed. The chronological framework was compiled from written sources¹ and archaeological material.

¹ In the compilation of part of the chronology of this research, upon the translation of Franjo BARIŠIĆ; it is an excellent compilation of critically appro-

Defining the boundaries of the Middle Ages is still one of the most arduous and challenging tasks in current research and understanding of the subject material. The region and the topic of research are some of the factors that influence the construction of the chronological framework and the timeline within it. The chronological boundaries will be seen more as processes of transformation than as set dates. Late Antiquity gave way to the Early Middle Ages gradually, yet irreversibly. The foundations on which the Late Antique world was laid were completely different from the ones of the later period, as George T. Dennis describes in the introduction to his translation of Maurice's *Strategikon*:

“... around the Mediterranean, into Europe and into Africa, one empire had held sway... There was simply Rome and non-Rome... Law and order were maintained and enemies held in check by one of the most efficient military machines in history, the Roman legion...”²

The Early Middle Ages brought the gradual disappearance of the strict dividing line between the *Barbaricum* and the civilised world. Christianity made them equal, at least those barbarian tribes that adopted it. The falling Western Empire and the rising Byzantium had a constant need of *foederati*, so yesterday's enemies became today's allies. Taking this into consideration, the chronology will begin with the first serious threats to the Roman Empire, up to the period when they were more or less neutralised. That is the period from the middle of the III century to the middle of the VII century.

The emphasis here will be placed on the V and the VI centuries, as the events that occurred during these two centuries are archaeologically the best documented in Macedonia. The middle of the III century is taken as the bottom chronological date because it is my opinion that the events that took place from that point onwards have deep repercussions on the follo-

ched primary sources concerning the history of the Balkans and Macedonia (see БАРИШИЋ *et al.*, 1995). For the general overview of the chronology of the Middle Ages, see TIERNY, 1999; and KNOWLES & OBOLENSKY, 1968. For the historical background of the Byzantine Empire, see KAEGI, 1982; KAEGI, 2003; and HALDON, 1997. For the general history of the Balkans during the Early Middle Ages, see OSTROGORSKY, 1969; and FINE, 1991. Of the works of these two authors, I would recommend the latter one, as being newer and more up-to-date with the current research and findings.

² DENNIS, 1984: vii.

wing ones. The top chronological boundary coincides with the end of the First and the beginning of the Second Avar Khaganate, the period when the brutal Avar and Avaro-Slavic³ raids on this territory ended. The timeline within will be focused on the military actions, such as barbarian invasions and attacks, as well as the response and measures taken against them by the *Romaioi*.

Great changes occurred during the reign of Diocletian, which seriously affected the Balkan region (284-305). In the III century, the Goths invaded Roman territory from across the Danube.⁴ Diocletian realised that the Empire was too large to be ruled and defended by one man alone, so he introduced the system of tetrachy. His military reforms, combined with those of Constantine, shaped the imperial army so as to be able to deal with the current threats more effectively. The army was divided in two major groups: the guardians of the frontiers (the so-called *limitanei*) and the mobile troops, organised in five units, each under a commander who reported directly to the Emperor himself. The task of the mobile units was to move swiftly from one endangered border to another.⁵

Although these reforms transformed the rigid, legion-based army into a mobile, horseman-based army, this did not cause the barbarian invasions to cease. In 375, shortly after the founding of Constantinople, the Huns crossed the river known today as the Volga.⁶ In doing this they penetrated into Gothic territory, forcing the Goths to cross the Danube and seek refuge in the Balkans. The Goths stayed on for approximately one century, first as enemies, then as allies of the Empire.⁷ Still, in this period, the Huns cross-

³ In this text, the Slavs will be seen only through the scope of their raiding activities with the Avars. The settlements of Slavs in this period on the territory of modern-day Macedonia are still an open issue in Macedonian archaeological discourse, although in older materials some archaeological finds are treated as evidence for Slavic settlements. See АЛЕКСОВА, 1989.

⁴ FINE, 1991: 13.

⁵ FINE, 1991: 19. See also TREADGOLD, 1996.

⁶ For a general history of the Huns, see MAENCHEN-HELFEN, 1973: 486-597; THOMPSON, 1966a; GORDON, 1966: 211-214; KOCH *et al.*, 2007: 378-388; BÖNA, 2002: 223-238; GARAM & KISS, 2002; and DAIM *et al.*, 1996: 67-165, 465-484. For the Huns on the Balkans, see КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 31.

⁷ 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; and THOMPSON, 1966b. For

sing the Volga triggered the Goths to move to imperial territory. They did not become a serious threat to the Empire until the V century. In 378, the Gothic and the Roman armies clashed at Adrianople in Thrace. Emperor Valens, who, together with many of his men, died in the battle, was succeeded by Theodosius. Theodosius made *foederati* out of the Goths, settling the Ostrogoths in Illyricum and the Visigoths in Thrace.⁸ From this moment onwards, the Ostrogoths played a major role in the history of the Balkans, in general, as well as in the territory of the central Balkan region.

Nevertheless, forming an alliance with one of the barbarian tribes did not necessarily mean that the others would not attack. In the period between 383 and 392, Pannonia was subjected to intense raids. After the division of the Empire in 395, the provinces south of the Danube were once again raided by the barbarian tribes situated along the Danube *limes*: the Sarmatians, Quadi, Alani, Vandals, Marcomanni, and the Huns.⁹ This was the first time that the Huns had appeared on the Danube frontier and thereafter they became a serious threat to the Byzantine Empire. The first part of the V century was marked by the domination of the Huns. They had military tactics and weapons that the *Romaioi* had never seen before, as well as the knowledge needed to breach fortifications.¹⁰

One of the biggest raids was that of 447, led by Attila himself. The targets of these raids were the rich Balkan cities, and Stobi,¹¹ the capital of Macedonia Secunda, was one of them. Other cities, such as Sirmium, Singidunum, Viminacium, Serdica, Naissus, Philippopolis, Margus and Ratiaria¹²

more about the Goths on the Balkans and their relationship with Byzantium, see ЗЕЧЕВИЋ, 2002: 205-207.

⁸ TREADGOLD, 1996:11.

⁹ КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 32.

¹⁰ УИТБУ, 1988: 67.

¹¹ Regarding the excavations in Stobi and the archaeological material that may be connected with the barbarian invasions, see WISEMAN & MANO-ZISSI, 1974; САНЕВ & САРЖОСКИ, 1981; and МИКУЛЧИЋ, 1981. For the numismatic materials possibly kept as a result of the military activities, see НАДЖИ-МАНЕВА, 2001; НАДЖИ-МАНЕВА & ИВАНИШЕВИЋ, 2003; and ХАЏИ-МАНЕВА & ВИНЧИЋ, 2000. To trace the barbarian raids via numismatic materials, beginning in the Danubian *limes* area and moving southward, see: МЕТКАЛФ, 1991; DUNCAN, 1993: 55-76; and РОПОВИЋ, 1980: 240-244.

¹² КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 32.

were attacked as well. Scupi, the capital of the province Dardania at that time, was most likely attacked during this raid as well. The raid has not been confirmed archaeologically on site, but if we take into consideration its geographical location¹³ and the fact that the nearby city of Stobi was attacked, it would be logical to suggest that Scupi¹⁴ also suffered.

Attila's armies came dangerously close to the capital itself, so Emperor Theodosius II had the Long Walls built as protection for the outskirts of Constantinople.¹⁵ The outcome of this raid was complete devastation and the destruction of no less than 70 cities. The southern-most point of the Hunic raids was Thermopylae. The Huns also raided Illyricum and Thrace, and forced the Empire to pay them tribute.¹⁶ The Hunic domination of the Balkans lasted until 450, when they shifted the focus of their raids to the West. Attila was defeated in Gaul and died in 453.¹⁷ After his death, a strong anti-Hunic coalition led by the Gepid king, Ardarich, defeated the Huns. This battle ended the era of Hunic domination on the Balkans and they no longer had any influence in the military activities there.¹⁸

¹³ This city was located on the Vardar-Morava route, a route exploited heavily by various barbarian groups, for it provided easy access to the north of Macedonia and further to the south. This will be discussed in greater detail in the section of this paper dedicated to the geographical features and roads in this area.

¹⁴ In the beginning of the Early Middle Ages, two cities existed in the vicinity of modern-day Skopje. The first was Scupi, founded as a Roman *castrum*, and then developing into a large urban settlement in the valley of the Vardar, given the rank *colonia*; the second was the fortified city of Markovi Kuli, founded around the VI century. The two cities probably existed side by side for some time. Scupi was hit by an earthquake in 518, yet it remained the archbishopric seat of Dardania until 535 (at least nominally), when that position was given over to the newly-founded Iustiniana Prima. As suggested by some objects discovered in tombs from the Eastern necropolis and the exposure of this city to constant raids, Ostrogothic *foederati* lived in Scupi for some time. See more in МИКУЛЧИК, 1974; МИКУЛЧИК, 1982: 50; and ОН-ЇВСКА-ТОДОРОВСКА, 2005.

¹⁵ Attila's army penetrated up to the north of Athyras, about 40 km from Constantinople. The Theodosian Long Walls ran from the Black Sea to Selymbria, on the Sea of Marmara. See WHITBY, 1988: 68.

¹⁶ TREADGOLD, 1996: 13.

¹⁷ WHITBY, 1988: 68.

¹⁸ КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 32.

With the disintegration of the Hunic federation, the Goths once again became a threat to the Byzantine Empire. They settled a territory they regarded as their own, to the north of Stara Planina.¹⁹ From there they launched attacks on Greece, Thrace, Thessaly, and Macedonia, reaching almost to the hinterland of Constantinople.²⁰ The Emperors Leo and Zeno tried to fuel the conflict between the Ostrogoths and the Visigoths, but with no success. In 479, the Ostrogoths, ruled by Theodoric, were offered land to settle in Dardania, in the vicinity of Pautalia.²¹ They accepted the offer, but that did nothing to stop them from continuing their raids. Once again, it was the big cities that were subjected to the raids: Heraclea Lyncestis and Epidamnos were evacuated, while the citizens of Thessalonica took the defence of the city into their own hands.²² Byzantine authority was reasserted on the Balkans when the Ostrogoths moved to Italy in 489. Again, this was part of the imperial Byzantine policy of playing one barbarian tribe against another. After 476, the Germanic²³ leader Odoacer ruled the West under the authority of Emperor Zeno. Theodoric was sent to Italy to restore Byzantine control. Yet, Theodoric formed a kingdom of his own, with the capital in Ravenna, including parts of the Western Balkans, Istria, Dalmatia, and part of Pannonia. Although the Ostrogothic Kingdom in Italy triggered other conflicts later on, its formation solved the problem of the Gothic presence on the Balkans.²⁴

During the reign of Anastasius (491-518), the Empire was weakened and went to war with the Persians. Reforms had to be introduced. The one

¹⁹ Stara Planina is a mountain range in the eastern Balkan region. It runs along the border of modern-day Bulgaria and the eastern part of modern-day Serbia, then continues eastwards through central Bulgaria and ends at the Black Sea coast. It is also known under the names of Balkan Mountain and Haimos Mountain.

²⁰ WHITBY, 1988: 68.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*: 69.

²³ Different literature attributes Odoacer to different Germanic or nomadic tribes, e.g. FINE, 1991, considers him a Goth. Yet, Walther Pohl, in his article about ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages, raises the possibility of ethnic ambiguity, suggesting that Odoacer adopted different identities during different stages of his career, in accordance with the current needs. See POHL, 1991: 41; REYNOLDS & LOPEZ, 1946; and GILLET, 2002.

²⁴ FINE, 1991:22.

reform that Anastasius made on the monetary system²⁵ affected the army as well. Soldiers' salaries increased as a result of these reforms, and consequently they lured many native inhabitants to enlist, thus decreasing the barbarian element in the Byzantine army. The end of the V century was a stable period, especially when compared with its tumultuous beginning. The VI century brought great changes. The Empire had to deal with danger coming from two different groups, the fierce Avars, on one hand, and the less belligerent but omnipresent Slavs, on the other. The Avars²⁶ gradually moved from their homeland in Central Asia towards the Hungarian Plain, where they established a powerful federation. The VI century was also marked by the reign of one of the most powerful Byzantine emperors – Justinian (527-565). This Emperor envisioned uniting both parts of the Empire under his power. He had a strong army led by experienced generals – Belisarius and Narses – but he also had unresolved conflicts with Persia. To avoid battling on two fronts, Justinian had to neutralise the Persian threat. He combined his experienced units with newly-recruited soldiers and created the new field army of Armenia. Being no match for the improved Byzantine army, Persia signed the so-called Perpetual Peace in 532.²⁷ To strengthen the protection of the Balkans, Justinian undertook an ambitious building project. On the territory of modern-day Macedonia, approximately 400 fortifications were built or renovated during the VI century alone.

Having neutralised the Persian danger, Justinian could then focus on his re-conquest of the West. He saw Theodoric as his biggest rival and the Ostrogothic Kingdom in Italy as the main obstacle for his plan to unite the Western and the Eastern Roman Empire. Justinian waged battle for 40 years for Italy, Spain and North Africa. This ambitious project required more and more soldiers, so Justinian sent part of the *limitanei* to Italy and thus left the Danube *limes* poorly defended.²⁸ The weakened Danube *limes* provoked the barbarians north of the Danube to carry out raids on imperial territory. This marked the beginning of the Avar-Slavic invasions.

²⁵ See more in GRIERSON, 1982: 4.

²⁶ On the general history and material culture of the Avars, see POHL, 1988: 567-822; DAIM *et al.*, 1996: 202-257, 465-484; GARAM & KISS, 2002; and VIDA, 2003.

²⁷ TREADGOLD, 1996:15.

²⁸ FINE, 1991: 22.

The first written records on the Slavs set them north of the Danube.²⁹ They carried out raids in Thrace and Macedonia and, up to a point, in Greece (Corinth was the southern-most point they reached). From the middle of the VI century, the raiding activities of the Slavs became an annual matter.³⁰ Although the raiders were very mobile, they were lightly armed and did not possess the knowledge needed to conquer fortified cities. At this time they were still just committing raids on Byzantine territory, but not settling. Their settlement was most likely triggered by the formation of the First Avar Khaganate in Pannonia.³¹ Some of the Slavs moved to the south and settled on the Byzantine territory as *foederati*,³² but a greater number were defeated by the Avars.

The Avars emerged into Europe fleeing from the Turkish federation, which was in expansion in the middle of the VI century.³³ They conquered the tribes who lived around the Black Sea, including the Coutrigurs.³⁴ One of the best-known raids carried out by the Coutrigurs is the one that took place in 539-540. The whole of Illyricum was raided, and the marauders even reached Chalcidice. This raid is also documented on the territory of modern-day Macedonia via numismatic materials.³⁵

When it comes to warfare, the Avars were quite the opposite of the Slavs. Although their units were also mobile and lightly equipped, their weapons and training were far superior. They were experienced horsemen and persistent enough to besiege fortified cities. The Avar Khans ruled a great conglomerate of people, having subdued the Slavs, the Protobulgars, and the remnants of the Huns to their power.³⁶ The only weak spot in Avar war-

²⁹ *Ibid.*; 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*; 28.

³¹ TREADGOLD, 1996: 15.

³² FINE, 1991: 29.

³³ WHITBY, 1988: 85. On the origin of the Avars, see КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 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.

³⁴ WHITBY, 1988: 85.

³⁵ КОНДИЈАНОВ, 1994.

³⁶ FINE, 1991:30.

fare was their inability to use and build boats.³⁷ The Slavs were familiar with watercraft and they played a major role in crossing the Danube and attacking cities with ports.

The Avars emerged on the Balkans by interfering in the matters of two other barbarian tribes – the Gepids and the Lombards. The Gepids took over the territory that had been vacated after the departure of the Ostrogoths for Italy, but the Lombards wanted to claim it. The alliance of the Lombard king, Alboin, and the Avar Khagan Baján in 566-567 brought the Avars into Pannonia. The Avars were promised Sirmium, as well as control over Pannonia, if they defeated the Gepids. The Gepids themselves, fearing a battle against two armies instead of one, turned to Emperor Justin II. They offered him Sirmium as a reward for the imperial help.³⁸ In 568 the battle for Sirmium began, and long sieges of Sirmium followed; both sides won and lost battles. The citizens of the city had to endure famine for several years and abandoned the city. The city finally fell under Avar control in 582, the same year that Maurice became Emperor. The loss of Sirmium meant the loss of control over Pannonia, and also the loss of an important strategic base in controlling the Danubian *limes*.³⁹ After the Lombards withdrew to Italy, the Avars were the sole masters of Pannonia. It was there that they built their federation under the rule of a Khagan.

The First or the Great Avar Khaganate lasted from 568 to 626, and the Second Khaganate from 626 to 811.⁴⁰ The period of the First Avar Khaganate marked the peak of Avar power and the period of the most severe raids. Usually, the Morava-Vardar route was used for invading the central Balkan region. These raids are well documented via archaeological material on the territory of present-day Macedonia. The final points of most of these raids were the capital itself, or the next best thing – Thessalonica. Two years after the conquest of Sirmium, an army of 5000 Slavic warriors, by the order of the Khagan, reached the Long Walls of Constantinople.⁴¹ Being unable to conquer the capital, the Slavs turned the scope of the raid towards

³⁷ WHITBY, 1988: 68.

³⁸ КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 40.

³⁹ FINE, 1991:30.

⁴⁰ The chronological framework of the Khaganates is given in КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 11.

⁴¹ WHITBY, 1988: 90.

Thessalonica; yet that was another failure.⁴² In 584, the Avars conquered Singidunum. Two year later, another siege of Thessalonica followed, but did not last long. The reason for the rapid withdrawal of the Avaro-Slavic army was the appearance of the plague and famine in the barbarian camp.⁴³ This siege was followed by great raiding activity in the provinces of Dardania, Macedonia Prima, Macedonia Secunda, and others. This was the year when urban life ended in the cities of Heraclea Lyncestis,⁴⁴ Bargala,⁴⁵ Stobi⁴⁶, and a destruction layer is documented on the fortress of Markovo Kale⁴⁷ in the vicinity of Skopje. The same raid is documented and coin-dated on two fortresses in the vicinity of Prilep.⁴⁸

The raiding activity of the Avaro-Slavic army lasted up until 591, when Emperor Maurice made peace with the Persians and transferred large army troops to the Balkans. He re-conquered Singidunum and sent the

⁴² КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 54; and БАРИШИЋ, 1995: 175.

⁴³ КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 57; and БАРИШИЋ, 1995: 176-184.

⁴⁴ On the excavations in Heraclea Lyncestis and the archaeological material that can be connected with the barbarian invasions, see МАНЕВА, 1983-84; МАНЕВА, 1985/86/87; МАНЕВА, 1988; and МАНЕВА, 1989. 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 general of the Byzantine army that was defending the city. See more in МАНЕВА, 1986; and МАНЕВА, 2001.

⁴⁵ АЛЕКСОВА, 1989; and АЛЕКСОВА, 2001.

⁴⁶ See Footnote 11.

⁴⁷ During the end of the V and the beginning of the VI century, around 400 fortifications were renovated or built on the territory of modern-day Macedonia, as greater protection from barbarian raids. See МИКУЛЧИЋ, 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 МИКУЛЧИЋ, 1982: 50; МИКУЛЧИЋ & НИКУЉСКА, 1979; МИКУЛЧИЋ & НИКУЉСКА, 1983; and МИКУЛЧИЋ & БИЛБИЈА, 1987.

⁴⁸ Life in these two fortresses, on the sites of Baba and Selce, ended in 586. The last coins found there belong to the 585-586 emission.

Avars and the Slavs behind the old Danube frontier. Nevertheless, the Avars besieged Singidunum on two other occasions, in 593 and 596. In 599 the Avars broke the defence of the *Romaioi* and reached the Long Walls of Constantinople. This attack was neutralised by the plague that hit the Avar army. One year later, Maurice re-conquered Sirmium and thus completely re-established the old Danube frontier. A peace treaty was signed and the Avars were paid an annual tribute for not attacking the Empire. Maurice broke this treaty first; in the very next year he sent armies across the Danube.⁴⁹

Although Maurice's campaign almost destroyed them, the Avars were able to consolidate themselves once again rather quickly. The Danube frontier once again lost its defensive importance and the Avars attacked during the reigns of Phocas and Heraclius. This was also the period of the largest Slavic settlement on the Balkans. The Avars shifted the scope of their raids to the west and attacked parts of modern-day western Bosnia, Croatia, and Dalmatia.⁵⁰ Salona was conquered between 619 and 626.⁵¹ In the second decade of the VII century, Thessalonica and Constantinople were once again targets of the Avaro-Slavic raids. In 617 or 618, Thessalonica was under siege once again; the mighty fortifications of the city yet again proved unbreakable and the city was left intact. The novelty of this siege was that it was carried out by the Slavic tribes who lived in the vicinity of Thessalonica. They invited the Avar Khagan to take part in the siege, promising rich gifts, but they negotiated as equal allies. The settlements of several Slavic tribes were already established, although some Slavs were still part of the Avar federation.⁵²

The Avars also did not succeed with the siege of Constantinople in 626. This is an important date because it denotes the end of the First Avar Khaganate, as well as the domination of the Avars on the Balkans. Although the power of the Avars was weakening with every failed siege, the Empire still perceived them as a threat. An abundance of fortifications, built and re-built during Justinian's reign on the territory of modern-day Macedo-

⁴⁹ FINE, 1991: 32-33.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: 34.

⁵¹ CURTA, 2006: 74.

⁵² CURTA, 2001: 108.

nia, was still in use, judging from the archaeological material⁵³ coming from them.

The attack started in the summer of 626. It was a joint attack by the Avars and the Persians, the horsemen being led by the Khagan himself.⁵⁴ Although siege machines were brought or built on site, the Long Walls protected the city again. The siege lasted for nine days and it ended with a crushing defeat for the Avars. A fleet of *μονοξύλα* navigated by the Slavs and Bulgars, which the Khagan was heavily counting on, was destroyed and the surviving Slavs fled. The events that followed this unsuccessful siege neutralised the Avars as the dominant military force on the Balkans. The Byzantine Emperor no longer perceived them as a serious threat and refused to pay them tribute. The Khagan ordered the execution of his Slavic subjects who had survived the siege and fled, thus giving a reason for conflict. This conflict resulted in a battle in 629, and in c. 635 the Bulgars, led by Koubrat,⁵⁵ were released from the Avar federation.⁵⁶ The army of the Avar federation was decimated by these actions. The lost supremacy in the Balkans denotes the beginning of the Second Avar Khaganate. Yet, in this period the Avars were of minor importance for the Balkans, since they were expanding to the west. After the fall of the Avar Khaganate, the newly established Bulgar state and the Empire fought for the Central Balkans.⁵⁷

⁵³ JARIĆ, 2010.

⁵⁴ КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 64; and CURTA, 2001: 108.

⁵⁵ Koubrat had five sons, but only two of them are important for the Balkans: Asparukh, who led the Bulgars to the Balkans, and Kouber, who led the *Sermensianoï* back to their homeland. The *Sermensianoï* were the people and the descendants of the people who were taken into the Avar Khaganate as slaves from the Balkan provinces. Although they lived among barbarians, they kept their Christian religion. In 680, taking advantage of the turmoil within the Avar federation, they went back to their homelands in the Balkans. However, Kouber intended to settle these people and rule them independently of the Avar Khagan and the Emperor. It is said that the *Sermensianoï* settled in the region of Κερραμῆσος, on the outskirts of Thessalonica. See БАРИШИЋ, 1995: 213; КОВАЧЕВИЋ, 1977: 88.

⁵⁶ FINE, 1991: 43.

⁵⁷ This expansion ended in the Avaro-Frankish war (791-805). When the war was finally over, the western parts of the Avar Khaganate were under Frankish control and the eastern parts had been conquered by the Bulgars, whose state was growing rapidly. The Avars appeared twice more on the Balkans,

The military activities discussed developed in such a pattern due to several factors, such as the number of roads that facilitated access to the endangered areas, as well as some landscape features that provided or lacked the function of a natural defence. The main geographical features of the Balkan Peninsula are the mountain ranges. The rivers are also an important feature, because most of the roads run along riverbanks. Although the mountains are a predominant feature on Balkan landscapes, they do not offer ideal natural protection. This is for the most part due to the fact that almost all the mountain ranges run from north to south, thus making the Balkans open to invasions from the north. The Stara Planina range, running from east to west, is an exception; it is not high enough to be an efficient barrier, but with an adequate military presence it may be defended. Thus, this range later became the border between the Byzantine Empire and the state of the Bulgars.⁵⁸

The main roads of the Balkans ran along the river valleys. Every micro-region had its own local network of routes and paths, but four major roads could be distinguished:

– The famous Via Egnatia, which connected the Adriatic coast with Constantinople, beginning at Dyrrachion (Durrazzo, Durres) and continuing through many stops, such as Lychnidos (modern-day Ohrid), Heraclea Lyncestis (near modern-day Bitola) and Thessalonica, the second-most important city in the Empire.⁵⁹

– The second was a military road beginning in Constantinople, crossing Thrace via Adrianople and Serdica (modern-day Sofia), then extending to Naissus (modern-day Nish) and Singidunum (modern-day Belgrade), separating at mid-Danube into two routes: one continuing to follow the Danube line and ending in today's southern Germany; the other route turning west from the Danube and following the Sava valley.⁶⁰

– The third road also began in Constantinople and went to Thrace; it turned north at Adrianople and crossed the Stara Planina range on the slopes near the Black Sea coast; then it turned west, passing through the plains

in 811 and 814, in completely different circumstances, not as conquerors, but as mere mercenaries in the army of the Bulgar Khan Krum. See FINE, 1991: 90-94.

⁵⁸ FINE, 1991: 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: 3.

⁶⁰ WHITTOW, 1996: 18.

south of the Danube and cut through the mountains south of the Iron Gates section of the *limes* and rejoined the second road near Singidunum.⁶¹

– The fourth road followed the Morava and Vardar valleys and connected the inland of Central Europe with the Aegean coast and the islands in the Mediterranean. It crossed the whole of the Central Balkans, beginning at the Danube and leading to Thessalonica.⁶²

Good road infrastructure meant better trade and easier transfer of an army from one endangered border to another. Yet, it made the Empire more vulnerable because the roads were used by the barbarians as well. One of the most exploited roads by the barbarians was the Morava-Vardar route, which provided a direct link between the Danubian regions and the Mediterranean. The river valleys not only provided conditions for establishing a network of roads on the Balkans, but they also served as borders. This was especially convenient for areas with no mountain ranges to serve as protection, such as the Great Hungarian Plain. The Danube was the only border between the Empire and the *Barbaricum*. Although conceptualised as a defence line, it was also a place for trade between the *Romaioi* and the barbarians, as well as a bridge for mutual influence.

Except for the Danube, the Sava, and the lower Neretva, the Balkan rivers were not navigable.⁶³ Nevertheless, the navigability of the rivers did not play a great role in the barbarian invasions because many of the tribes⁶⁴ that raided the Balkans had no knowledge of building and using boats. Most of them were horsemen, who followed the riverside roads to reach the target areas of their raids. Rivers that were not very wide or rocky and were very fast did not cause problems for the horsemen, as they were trained to cross such rivers with their horses. Crossing rivers with horses made the attackers vulnerable during the crossing, as well as at the moment of arriving on the other side, because they could not use their bows and arrows at that time. Thus, a well-organised defence line along the rivers provided good protection. On the other hand, horseman warriors, particularly of steppe origin, were trained to make “unexpected” crossings (even at night) and to attack the defenders. Thus, the mountains and the rivers of the Central Bal-

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² АЛЕКСОВА, 1989: 12.

⁶³ FINE, 1991: 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: 30.

kans offered certain natural elements in the defence of the region, but this was not enough without a well-organised military-administrative system.

It is important to stress that the administrative division given below predates the Early Middle Ages. This is the administrative division that the Romans employed after conquering the Balkans in the II century CE. Thus, the administrative system of the region was not created in the context of continuous raids to that region, and was vulnerable to these attacks. Hence, some changes were introduced, such as slightly modifying the borders between the two neighbouring provinces and improving the already-existing fortifications that ran along the borderlines, as well as building many new ones. As a result, the transformations facilitated the process of coping with the new situations.

The territory of modern-day Macedonia belonged to several different provinces:⁶⁵

– Macedonia Secunda or Macedonia Salutaris:⁶⁶ most of the territory of the Central Balkans belonged to Macedonia Secunda, also known as Macedonia Salutaris. This province followed the line of the Vardar and its capital was Stobi.

– Macedonia Prima: the southern and the central part of modern-day Macedonia, with Thessalonica as its capital. One of the biggest cities, Heraclea Lyncestis, was located in Macedonia Prima. This province was also important because most of Via Egnatia ran through it.

– Epirus Nova: a small, south-western part of modern-day Macedonia was located in Epirus Nova. The capital of this province was Dyrrachion. The city of Lychnidos (modern-day Ohrid) was located on the territory of Epirus Nova and was considered to be one of the most important urban and ecclesiastical centres during the Middle Ages.

– Dardania: the northern part of the Central Balkans was located in Dardania, and Scupi (modern-day Skopje) was its capital and an important archbishopric seat until 535, when the newly-founded Iustiniana Prima became the capital of the province. This area was the most exposed to barbarian raids, if they were not stopped at the Danube *limes*.

– Dacia Mediterranea: a very small, north-eastern part of modern-day Macedonia was located in this province. Bargala, another big city (near

⁶⁵ *Notitia Dignitatum*; БРАТОЖ, 2000.

⁶⁶ Both of these names refer to the same area; Macedonia *Salutaris* is the older one.

modern-day Shtip), first belonged to Dacia Mediterranea, but by the end of the VI century it was listed as a city in Macedonia Secunda.⁶⁷

– Praevalitana: a small, north-eastern part of modern-day Macedonia.

The combination of certain natural defences and the provincial borderline fortifications provided some protection from the barbarian raids. Intense raids did occur, yet they were followed by reconstruction. Life in the large urban centres certainly underwent changes and decreased to a more modest level, but it was not completely destroyed by the barbarian incursions. The rich provinces were equally important for both the barbarians and the *Romaioi*, so a military response and a renewal action followed a given raid. Conquering the cities, especially the capitals, promised booty for the barbarians, but also control of the provinces themselves. The Empire fought against the loss of these provinces using all the means it had at its disposal. Fortifications were built and rebuilt and manned by great numbers of troops. More often than not, the Emperors fuelled conflicts between the barbarian tribes or the settled tribes as *foederati* to play the role of buffers against the other tribes.

The area of modern-day Macedonia was directly involved in most of the major raiding activities; it had minimal natural defences in terms of mountain ranges, and many river valleys cut across it that could have been used as routes by the barbarian marauders. The border between the provinces of Dardania and Macedonia Secunda was especially threatened because this area lay on the long Morava-Vardar route. The rich urban centres such as Scupi, Stobi, Heraclea Lyncestis, and Bargala were targets of continuous barbarian raids, and as such, these raids and raiding patterns are for the most part confirmed by both contemporary written sources and the archaeological material that come from destruction layers of these big urban centres and the fortifications of the borders. Thus, a study targeting the military impact on this area should focus on written sources as well as various archaeological material, so as to reconstruct as accurate an image of this region in the Early Middle Ages as possible.

⁶⁷ АЛЕКСОВА, 1989: 42.

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