

The persistence of the limes and the condition of the defensive system as reflections of the general collapse of the state system in the Early Byzantine Balkans

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of the early Byzantine limes in the northern Balkan region and its possible connection to stability and settlement development in the hinterland. Although this topic has been widely discussed in the past by a number of scholars, reconsideration of some theses and ideas, seen through the results of recent archaeological excavations, is needed. We believe that a detailed examination of the problems associated with existence, structure, permeability and security of the border will contribute greatly to asking the right questions about the overall fall and disintegration of the early Byzantine system of government and administration. Additionally, questions about the evident cultural decline are considered. Most of the issues concerning the limes are connected with the strategic reorganization of the defense of the Balkans. This is made for the better security of the local communities during their struggle for survival in a time of natural disasters, depopulation, constant barbarian raids and limited settlement of a foreign population. In the second half of the sixth and the seventh centuries, almost everything came down to self-sufficiency and survival through decentralization and local management of resources, production, and defense. Byzantium only formally retained authority over a part of the Balkan provinces, primarily through a number of strategic strongholds, mostly located offshore, on the islands and rarely inland. Only there the last remains of the urban elite and the military aristocracy survived. Purely formal authority over a large part of the territories conquered during Justinian's reign indicates an economic downturn, complete disintegration of the administrative system and a collapse of the military and administrative organization in a great part of the Balkans. All the problems to be considered will be seen through the prism of the complex cultural, historical and socioeconomic framework of the period.

KEYWORDS

Balkan, limes, early Byzantine, settlements, defense, disintegration.

Introduction

This study is an examination of the early Byzantine limes in the northern Balkan region and an attempt to reconsider some problems connected with the efficiency of the border and the inland defense system¹. Additionally, this study investigates the possible connection and correlation of the consistency of the defensive system with the evident decline in almost every aspect of societal organization during the second half of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century. Still, we must note that in this article there is limited space for review of the complete development of Balkan frontier policy, beginning with the reign of Domitian (81-96), and especially during that of Hadrian (117-138), i.e., the time of change in Roman expansionist policy (Henderson 1923, 140-167; Fields 2003, 4, 10; Fields 2005, 20, 33). At the very beginning, however, we should point out a very important hypothesis. The Empire's strategy for border maintenance in Britain, Germany, Africa and the East during the early Roman period is manifested through the building of linear stone

1 Preliminary results from this research were presented in the paper *Northern Balkan Limes and the system failure in the hinterland of the peninsula during the early Byzantine period*, at the „III international scientific symposium “DAYS OF JUSTINIAN I” Byzantium and the Heritage of Europe: Connecting the Cultures”, held in Skopje, R. Macedonia (30.10. - 31.10.2015) – not submitted for publishing in the proceedings.

fortification belts, reinforced with forts. But in the same period on the Pannonian segment of the limes, the fortifications were still built of wood (Šašel Kos 1996, 147). This suggests that in the second century the segment of the limes on the Danube was not considered a permanent border, primarily because of the complexity of holding a frontier set directly on that line. We must always keep in mind that available resources and geomorphological and topographic predispositions (deserts, mountain chains, rivers and other bodies of water) were among key factors that affected the quality of building material and technology of building.² Although of minor benefit for the Empire, from this viewpoint Trajan's conquest of Dacia in 106 can also be seen as a search for an easily defensible frontier in the Carpathian Mountains (Jančura et al. 2014, 87). The Danube frontier line that we find during the great Hunnic invasion was established in 271, after Aurelian's retreat and the abandonment of Dacia (Drinkwater 2008, 53).

Data and methods

A large part of this article is dedicated to historical background correlated with results of archaeological research. Therefore, stratigraphy of settlements and movable archaeological finds from the northern and middle Balkan provinces are taken into consideration. At this level of archaeological research, we see this approach as an adequate one for better understanding of the development of the defensive system. The grand strategy for effective protection and security of the border and the hinterland was maintained through the implementation of a variety of different measures. Although the early Byzantine limes on the Danube has been long and widely discussed in the past by a number of scholars, this study is focused on the possible connection of the development of the limes with the chronology of raids on settlements on the Balkans. The question is whether and to what extent results of the archaeological studies and changes detected in remains of early Byzantine architecture and infrastructure in the settlements can be connected with events on the Danube. The study is focused on the period from the breakdown of defense in the Pannonian limes (Slabe 1989, 213; Gračanin 2018, 339-340, 343), through the attempts at reconstruction by Anastasius (491-518) and Justinian (527-565), until successive negligence and final abandonment of the Lower Danube limes during the rule of Phocas (602-610) in 604. These considerations are based on published hypotheses tested through results of recent archaeological excavations and research. The disintegration of systems of administration and provincial security, the possible settlement of a foreign exogenous population, and the potential of the state for resolution of problems during the period under consideration are just a few of many different questions that arise from this research topic.

Historical background and archaeological data

The architectural, infrastructural and logistical engineering made on the limes during the reigns of Diocletian (284-305), Constantine (307-236), and later Valentinian (364-375) (Šašel Kos 1996, 153-161) were seriously affected by the migration of the Goths in the later part of the fourth century. According to the thesis of V. Ivanišević, based on analysis of the circulation of solidi in the northern part of Dacia at the end of the fourth and the first half of the fifth century, there was evident retreat of part of the population, probably the elite,

2 For phases of development of the Balkan limes (Максимовић 1980, 20).

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Fig. 1. Map of the Roman Empire ca. 400 AD. Available: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Roman_Empire_ca_400_AD.png (06.03.2019)

Обр. 1. Карта на Римската империя около 400 сл. Хр. Достъпна на: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Roman_Empire_ca_400_AD.png (06.03.2019)

to the south, to the more secure area in the southern part of Moesia I, the northern part of Dacia Mediterranea and Dardania (Ivanišević 2015, 659) (fig. 1)

This was the period when foederati of Gothic origin took part in the military organization. The demographic movement was followed by reduction of the area of towns, abandonment of some limes forts, and abandonment of villae rusticae, vici and burgi (Ivanišević 2015, 659, 661). The same attitude is attested in Scythia (Торбатов 2002, 460). All this had a very serious demographic and economic impact. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries, traditional earlier agricultural rural landscapes were modified also in Thrace and Dacia (Dumanov 2015, 100). As a response to decreased defensive efficiency, Theodosius II (408-450) introduced a wide range of measures. They included increased control of the supply system, construction and reconstruction of fortifications, and rebuilding and reorganization of the Danube fleet in Thrace and Illyricum (Ivanišević 2015, 653-654). Fortification of private estates was permitted during this period (Kirilov 2007, 18).

During the early Hunnic attacks in the first decades of the fifth century, many settlements in the Danube area fell on hard times. Results from excavations in Ratiaria, Sucidava, Oescus, Dimum, Novae, Iatrus, and Transmarisca indicate a high level of threat (Иванов 1999, 307). Defense on the western segment of the Balkan limes was crushed in 441 and 443. Also, some of the most important settlements for maintenance of border defense, such as Singidunum, Viminacium, Aquae, and Pontes, suffered serious damage. Some of them

remained in ruins until the time of Anastasius and Justinian (Максимовић 1980, 21-22). Within the northwestern inland part of the Prefecture of Illyricum (Diocese of Illyricum [Pannonia]), numerous Roman cities were nearly abandoned or lost their importance during the fifth century. This is evident in regions along rivers, in valleys and along main communication routes. There was a tendency toward resettlement on higher locations and places protected by nature, far away from the roads. Part of the population of these cities migrated to Italy. Therefore, only isolated remains of habitation can be detected in these settlements during the sixth century (Slabe 1989, 213; Ciglenečki 2009, 210-211; Papeša 2012, 435-436).

Recovery of settlements north of the Balkan Mountains was much more problematical. The urban centers in Moesia II lost their role and significance. Additionally, we have evidence for resettlement of the clerical, military and civil elite in better-defended locations; this was not an issue south of the Balkan Mountains, where functional post-villa *vici* and urban centers existed (Dumanov 2015, 97-98, 101). In the northern part of the Diocese of Dacia disintegration of earlier local communities and reduction of settlement area is evident. Even where life continued (Burgenae, Drobeta, Romula, Aquae, Singidunum, Viminacium), the very first serious and ambitious rebuilding activities took place late in the reign of Anastasius (Максимовић 1980, 22, footnote 25; Иванов 1999, 317; Ivanišević 2015, 659-661; Crow 2007, 401-408). According to written testimonies and available data for events in this period, it appears that in the very first decades of the sixth century, the Balkan defensive system was far from efficient and undoubtedly it was in no condition to play an effective role in preventing and dealing with attacks. During this period, the greatest threat came through the Lower Danube. The main raiding targets were settlements in the Diocese of Thrace and especially those in the province of Europe. This is why in 499 and 530 the army from Illyricum had to intervene in Thrace (Марцелин Комит, Хроника Ind. VII. Iohannis Gibbi Solivs, Ind. VIII. Lampadii et Orestis; Иванов 1984, 50). This was a period when the Empire regained control over part of the western segment of the Balkan limes. The attacks from the first decades of the sixth century did not have a serious impact on settlement life in the Prefecture of Illyricum so that the recovery was easier (Максимовић 1980, 23-24). The evident danger in Thrace resulted in serious imperial intervention with the foundation of Anastasius' Long Wall (Bury 1958, 435-436; Crow, Ricci 1997, 237-253).

In 533/34 Kildibius, the military commander of the army on the limes, was defeated, and control in one limes segment was taken by the Huns, Slavs, and Antae (Procopius, Wars VII. xiv. 1-6). Justinian's great attempt to restore and strengthen the defensive system on the Danube and in the Balkan provinces probably started before, and certainly after the Hunnic raid in 538-540, and ended as late as 554 (Талевски 2015а, 394, footnote 5). During its first phase, the focus was on refortification of the limes and the hinterland, while in the second phase activities in the hinterland prevailed. According to Procopius' list, in Illyricum 300 fortifications were built or refortified; 54 of those were on the limes. In the Diocese of Thrace, the number was 200, 76 on the limes. Of crucial importance during the period was the security of the crossroad in the area around Naissus where, according to Procopius, 32 out of 39 fortifications were newly built (Максимовић 1980, 39).

We can assume that this difference in numbers is a result of the geography and permeability of these two limes sectors. The complexity and efficiency of in-depth defense, which is very dependent on topography and terrain, was another factor. In the eastern segment, the initial importance was in stopping the raiders at the border, before their entrance into the plains and the valleys of the Diocese of Thrace (Иванов 1984, 49). This is also

evident in Scythia where, given the actions taken, the Empire did not consider fighting on home ground (Топбаров 2002, 438-439). There, the first in-depth organization of defense was established after the second half of the fifth century. Additionally, few linear fortified belts stood on the path to Constantinople (Wendel 2005, 424, 426). On the other hand, in mountainous Prefecture of Illyricum, there was a deeper, regional and more dispersed system of defense. The level of potential threat during the period was another factor that affected the number and concentration of defensive building activities. The differences are visible also in the administrative and church reorganization. In Thrace, even from the earlier period, there was a tendency for a territorial unification of administrative units and centralization of the government (Иванов 1984, 50). The regional military command in the Diocese of Thrace was established in the fourth century. The praefectorum praetorio or in this case vicarius Thraciae had his headquarters in Constantinople. His authority was not taken over by comites provinciarum. The headquarters of the supreme commander of the military organization in Thrace – comes rei militaris, later magister equitum et peditum per Tracias, were also in Constantinople (Топбаров 2002, 24-26, 440; Dumanov 2015, 92). In some provinces, the duces had control over the sacer comitatus. In Illyricum, however, countermeasures were applied. There strategic transformation of the civil, religious and military administration led to segmentation and fragmentation of administrative and ecclesiastical units and to decentralization of their government. Considering the organization of the defense, the idea was to use decentralization throughout regions, with effectiveness based primarily on the principle of network and local self-coordination and less on the principle of additional linear fortifications (Иванов 1984, 37). These measures were implemented to reduce the speed, depth of penetration and strength of raiders through minimization of the consequences. The regional or local defenses were usually coordinated by one larger strategically positioned center. Procopius' arrangement of newly constructed and renovated forts supports this thesis. Some of them are listed by the flow of the Danube and in the interior some are given according to the provinces where they are located, but only those of Dacia Mediterranea are listed in regions under the cities of Serdica, Cabetzos, Dyrtesium, Germania, Pautalia, Scassetana, Naissos, Remisianisia, Aquenisium (Stričević 1961, 179; Иванов 1984, 43-45). Enumerating them according to cities takes precedence over that by provinces; for example, Scupi is listed under the region of Serdica rather than under the province Dardania.

The security of the roads and crossroads, the visual communication lines and the protection of the passes that led into the flatlands were crucial factors in the efficiency of the defense. The idea was the application of a series of preventive measures before raiders were in a position to easily overcome great distances. Most of the fortifications were positioned on main routes. Nevertheless, the main reasons for the disastrous development of the situation during the following decades were the timing of Justinian's *Renovatio Imperii*, the inefficiency of the defensive system and the lack of experienced defenders and field army (Fotiu 1988).

As a result of the raids of Gepids, Heruli and Lombards, and the intensification of Hunno-Slavic attacks first in the period 536-540 and after the period 545-551, when the Kutrigurs and the Slavs with the assistance of the official Byzantine allies, the Gepids, crossed the Danube, the situation on the limes was seriously destabilized. This resulted in the first winter of the Slavs on Byzantine territory in 551 (Procopius Wars, VII cont. xl. 33-34; Максимовић 1980, 33-35). After the death of Justinian in 565, a period of redistribution of powers on the limes followed, which resulted in a situation where the Avars (Gračanin



Fig. 2. The Balkans during the last decades of the 6th century AD. Map generated by H. Talevski using QGIS software

Обр. 2. Балканите през последните декади на VI в. сл. Хр. Картата е изготвена от Х. Талевски, с помошта на програма QGIS

2009, 8) and the free Slavs on the Lower Danube became the next major threat to the Empire. During this period, the pressure was distributed throughout the whole line of the Balkan limes (Максимовић 1980, 44). Also, here we must note that the military policy on both sides was very inconsistent. A good example for this inconsistency is the pass granted to the Avars into Byzantine territory by the right bank of the big river in 578/79, in order to engage the Slavs behind the Lower Danube (Менандар Протектор Фрагменти, p. 90-92; Gračanin 2009, 11). Extensive hoarding during the late 570s and early 580s is evidenced south of the Lower Danube (Gandila 2018, 129).

The gates to the western Balkans and also to the hinterland of the peninsula were finally opened with the loss of the strategically important city of Sirmium in 582 (Gračanin 2009, 12-14). Alongside the total awareness considering the interpretation of the archaeological finds, a hypothesis about the Avars controlling the passes on the Danube in this section during the period is presented (Gračanin 2009, 17-18). This coincides with the intensification of Slavic attacks in the Diocese of Thrace in 581. Besides the clear breakdown somewhere around the middle of the sixth century, the settlements on the limes in Moesia II and Scythia, as well as many other settlements throughout the Balkans, suffered the most devastating blow sometime around 584/5. A total of twelve hoards have been discovered on the territory of R. Macedonia (Хаџи-Манева 2008, 383-387; Хаџи-Манева 2010, 58). The monetary finds in the region of southern Dardania and Macedonia II provide evidence of a possible threat and very probably raids in the years 583/4 and 584/5. The terminus post

quem for the latest imported North African pottery at Stobi, the capital of Macedonia II, is the year 570. On the basis of single coin finds and seven hoards (Хаџи-Манева 2010, 24), the latest date for the importation of this pottery was 585/6 (Радњански 2016, 165)³. These dates coincide with the intensification of the Avar offensive policy in 584-586. Their focus was on the systematic annihilation of the Danube limes in order to prevent a possible Byzantine attempt to enter the heartland of the Khaganate in Pannonia. This was the period in which besides Sirmium, also Singidunum, Viminacium, Augusta, Aquae, Bononiae, Ratiariae, Durostorum and Anchilaos on the coast of the Black Sea, were all successfully raided (Максимовић 1980, 46-48; Madgearu 2006, 152)⁴ (fig. 2)

According to numismatic evidence, the greatest numbers of fortifications in the Iron Gates Gorge were attacked around the middle of the last decade of the sixth century - August 595 - August 596 (Максимовић 1980, 50). Some of them, because of their strategic importance, had been immediately rebuilt after their destruction ten years earlier. According to some researchers, exactly in this period, the disintegration of the Illyricum defense on the Danube was complete (Popović 1975, 489). After the destruction of 40 fortifications in Dalmatia in the year 597, the Avars crushed the continental defense in Dalmatia (Gračanin 2009, 14). In the period 593-598, the Avars spread their territory as far as Ratiaria and Oescus. This resulted in the loss of Byzantine control over some of the key Danube bridgeheads and the opening of the raiding routes upon the rivers Morava, Timacus and Oescus (Madgearu 2006, 152-153). In this period they even held one of the key passes over the Balkan Mountains (Madgearu 2016, 214). After a relatively successful offensive military policy, in 598 (according to some 600, or even 601), a truce was made, the Danube formally became an official border, and the Byzantines had the exclusive right to engage the Slavs behind the Lower Danube (Theophylacti Simocatae Historiae, VII.15). This is the period when many of the fortifications in Scythia ceased to function. The remains of continuous life clearly evident in some of them contradict any idea of organized and functional defensive infrastructure (Торбатов 2002, 463). This was when the Lower Danube limes suffered the final blow and disintegrated as a result of its complete military abandonment in 604 (Иванов 1999, 307; Madgearu 2006, 156)⁵. The total collapse of the Byzantine military and administrative control in Illyricum happened during the very first decades of the seventh century (Popović 1975, 488-490). From then on, Byzantium controlled only a network of fortifications on the Danube; they were accessible only by water (Madgearu 2006, 157-158; Gandila 2018, 116, f. 42).

Results and discussion

Most of the intricate processes of asystematic and systematic settlement change that began in the past had their climax and some even their epilog in the period from the reign of Justinian to the very first decades of the seventh century. Around the middle of the sixth

3 This pottery was continuously traded and used later in the seventh century in other parts of the Mediterranean, together with the possibility of continuous use of the Thessalonica mint emissions after 585 (Хаџи-Манева 2008, 389), are weakening this long and widely used hypothesis about the end of settlement life in Stobi in the year 585/6. For more on this topic and to the awareness of interpreting numismatic data, also used as an argument in this article, see Metcalf 1991, 143; Curta 1996, 65-79.

4 For numismatic finds in provinces throughout the Balkans, see Максимовић 1980, 48; Madgearu 2006, 152-153; Mihaylov 2012, 462, 465-466 with the cited bibliography.

5 For a different opinion about this question, see Popović 1975, 489; and also Gandila 2018, 130.

century, the centuries-long processes of settlement change directly affected by state and ecclesial policy came to an end. In the following period, there was a gradual entry of processes that weakened the role of the state and its power to act in any field. The full settlement management relied mainly on the local communities and local clergy through their needs and struggle for survival. There was an immediate connection between the development of the situation on the limes and the changes visible in the settlements of the hinterland. The tendency toward a gradual limes breakdown from west to east was followed by economic disturbance and a reduced level of administrative control throughout the provinces. The provinces closer to the limes were more affected. The manifestations were directly connected to the level of exposure. During the second half of the sixth century, we must doubt the efficiency of the strategy for temporary abandonment of vulnerable areas, temporary sheltering and residence in well-defended locations, and return to the settlement after the end of danger.

During the period under consideration, we can generally distinguish three phases. The first phase to the middle of the sixth century was a period when the Empire had the economic capacity to resolve problems on the limes, but general demographic problems affected army recruitment. This conclusion applies in particular to the reign of Justinian and his *Renovatio Imperii*. Additionally, from the 540s and 550s military service became unattractive because of payment irregularities due to the massive financing of building activities (Fotiou 1988, 65-67, 70-71). As the situation progressed, a longer stay and even permanent settlement in high, well-defended locations became a necessity and not a choice, because of safety and existential concerns. Construction of defensive infrastructure and church architecture in some provinces was significantly reduced and, according to some researchers, even stops sometime after the mid-sixth century (Костић 1993, 43; Snively 2009, 40-41). In the dioceses of Thrace and Dacia, the middle of the century marks the culmination of the development of fortified settlements (Динчев 2006, 77). This is the period when few fortifications were *a fundamentis* built on the coast of Scythia (Торбатов 2002, 461-462). The responsibility for maintenance of defense on the limes gradually crossed over to the hand of the local population and clergymen (Динчев 2006, 53).

In the second phase, during the first decades of the second half of the sixth century, there was a weakness of the state that struggled to stop the loss of territories and the asystematic disintegration. The Empire had neither economic nor military potential for resolution of the newly developed situation. There is a clear picture of missed opportunity and exhaustion of the state system. Instead of expanding the boundaries, a serious consolidation and immediate offensive response to the threats coming from the Danube limes was needed during Justinian's reign. There is an impression of a not quite realized agenda. Justinian's successors on the throne inherited an extremely difficult task in the administrative, economic and military reconsolidation of the Empire. Justin II (565-574), Tiberius II Constantine (574-582) and Maurice (582-602) tried to maintain and protect what had been built before; the implementation of advanced technological and engineering innovations is also evident in the period (Торбатов 2002, 462). The innovations are not exclusive to the province of Scythia (Талеvски 2015b). To reduce the crisis caused by the economic, demographic and military exhaustion of the system, Tiberius II Constantine in 575 recruited mercenaries on Avar territory for the war with the Sassanids (Evagrius History, V.14) and reduced all taxes for a whole year. Maurice increased the taxes and reduced the salary of the military by a quarter (Sarris 2002, 51; Haldon 2005, 54); the inability to recruit an army from Illyricum and Isauria was resolved by recruitment in Armenia (Charanis 1961, 141-142).

Hence, in the third phase, during the last decades of the sixth century, there was an attempt to save what remained, but the systematic annihilation of the Byzantine border and inland defenses made this attempt just a prolongation of the inevitable end during the first decades of the seventh century.

Yet, this generalization is too broad, mainly because the intensity of the processes was quite diverse throughout the Balkans. There are evident differences between the territories of the Prefecture of Illyricum and the Diocese of Thrace, and also between the provinces on the limes and those from the middle and southern parts of the peninsula. Still, the building of sustainable universal models on wide regions is impossible and additional in-depth research is necessary for clarification of certain issues and processes in narrower geographical regions and settlements alone. There is no question that the demographic decline during a period of significantly reduced security resulted in military recruitment problems. This situation coincided with constant social, economic and psychological distress, significantly contributed to the collapse of the Byzantine administrative, economic, and military system on the Balkans. Additionally, the inefficiency of the defensive system, seen through the constant need for a greater number of professional soldiers to organize the defense initiated several processes. First of all, it triggered internal and more local migration of the Roman population, and then they even started to migrate to other better-defended locations. This refers to the resettlement of the rural population to the surrounding or even inside more protected settlements in the vicinity. Thus, in the territory of the Empire, space was open for mass migration and eventual permanent settlement of population of exogenous origin⁶.

Selective use of written sources to fill in the gaps in archaeological records is a large methodological problem that should be solved with high-quality excavations and implementation of the research methods of the exact sciences. This issue is especially problematic when theses about the possible ethnicity and identity of some population are presented and when the impact of possible raids is estimated in particular regions. The ethnic interpretation of the archaeological finds during this period of extreme demographic fluidity is always a very serious matter to concern. Despite numerous textual references about the high frequency of invasions and raids by different tribes and tribal conglomerates, there are few archaeological finds that can be reliably connected to a massive and continuous presence of an exogenous population. An additional problem is the fact that they are usually presented in vast geographical regions and, unless taken out of context, they represent a negligible proportion compared to what we consider to be of autochthonous Balkan origin. Here, few very important question should be asked. How will we determine someone's ethnicity on the basis of the movable find, when dealing with a situation of total demographic and ethnic fluidity, when Roman fugitives resettled in better defended settlements with their inventory limited to what they could have carried, and when there are clear evidences of parallel limited settlement of exogenous population (warriors, prisoners, servants, diplomats etc.) in places where there was limited capacity for normal production activities, and in times when the craftsmen were among the first who could afford long distance resettlement in more secure and well defended places? How can we determine someone's ethnicity, and why is it so important at all, especially if they had close contacts with Roman or „barbarian?“ culture for a longer period of time? Who was „the real Slav“, the one that fought with

6 For the time of the first massive migration and permanent settlement of exogenous population, see Charanis 1953; Vryonis 1981, 379-380; Миллинковић 2006, 245-246, 262; Gračanin 2009, 21-22; Ivanišević 2012, 57, 61-62; Рапеša 2012 435-437; Станев 2012, 174-175; Бугарски, Радишић 2016, 98-99; Грозданова 2018.

Belisarius beneath the walls of Rome, or the „free Slav“, behind the Lower Danube? Who was the real Roman, the poor fugitive who found his place in Thessalonica or the bishop or the nobleman who were taken prisoner by the Avars?

Considering the archaeological data, we can absolutely exclude any early mass migration, at least until the last decade of the sixth century or most probably the first decades of the seventh century (Баришић 1956; Popović 1975, 489-493). In the present state of research, during the sixth century in archaeological records, we can see only the physical presence of smaller groups within or near pre-existing settlements. But their number, the duration and the reason for their stay, and also their relationship to the locals are questions too hard to answer with the limited available archaeological material. Especially when this material comes from a random number of widely dispersed archaeological contexts. The effects of the demographic movement in the following period, complemented by strong depopulation in the previous period, had a direct impact on all aspects of settlement life in the Balkans: from resources, habitats and other facilities and infrastructure, all the way to defense, social and political organization, religion and other. Still, the lack of direct widespread evidence for plague and its particular impact in narrow regions is a problem deserving much attention. We must also note that the degree of influence of some factors during the overall complex social, natural and historical context are under pressure of serious scientific criticism. Therefore, especially cautious approach is needed while considering their manifestations in certain regions and settlements. The widespread societal decline is manifested in reduced economic and professional specialization, less centralized control, decreased investment in art and architecture, a reduced quantity and quality of information transmission, reduced trading, and reduced general coordination (Tainter 1988, 4, 19-20, 193). This undoubtedly resulted in increased unrest because of dissatisfaction with general living conditions, food and hygiene. The collapse of monetary trade relations and the withdrawal of military control undoubtedly contributed to lifestyle changes, change in the economy and maybe even a change of the living environment of the surviving population for only one reason, i.e., production of enough food for survival. The lack of military capacity, experienced soldiers and institutions needed to organize the defense, the social life and a sustainable large-scale economy, additionally increased the agony that befell the surviving population during the second half of the sixth and seventh centuries.

Conclusions

During the period under consideration, the Empire did not have the capacity needed to maintain an efficient defensive strategy along the border and in the hinterland, without the support of an offensive military policy⁷. That is why it failed in dealing with the challenges during a great part of the fifth and the sixth centuries. During this period, a constant need for small, extremely mobile and well-coordinated military units was essential, as was their ability to merge their forces to battle against numerous invaders. The chronic lack of mobile forces, like those of *sacer comitatus* (Иванов 1999, 307, Топѡатов 2002, 459) and the need to build a flexible system of intra-provincial security were among the crucial factor that resulted in withdraw of the defensive policy. According to some authors, this was a result of their continuous station in the cities (Динчев 2006, 79). There was need of

⁷ For an opposite opinion see Sarantis 2016, a publication that was not available to the author of this article until recently.

mobile professional soldiers capable for fast and easy reorganization and transformation from intra-provincial security to army engaged in neutralization and elimination of the potential external threat. This need for a flexible system of intra-provincial security is exceptionally evident in the mountainous and barely passable regions in the Prefecture of Illyricum, where movement of a large army was arduous and it was incompetent in so-called „guerrilla warfare“. Additionally, Procopius stated that very often military magistrates of the available army in Thrace and Illyricum were forbidden by Justinian to take military action against the “Huns”, because the alliance with them was to fight against the Goths and against other enemies (Procopius, Secret History XXI). A fine example is a letter sent by Belisarius in the period 545/6 that warns Justinian that the number of military forces in Thrace and Illyricum is very low and they are highly inexperienced (Procopius, Wars VII. XII. 3-5). On the other hand, a well-organized multi-purpose army was needed for dealing with armies like those of the Sassanids and the Ostrogoths. This is the reason why, during these two centuries, a great number of fortifications were built in places difficult to dwell in but easy to defend and survive in (Динчев 2006, 73). This led to an isolation of people behind fortification walls. Without entering into deeper analysis and going out of this article’s research focus, given the actions taken during the rule of Anastasius and Justinian, we may assume that the state authorities were aware of and very well understood the danger and the imminent threat arising from the north. But the devastating *Renovatio Imperii* and the shift in focus of the offensive military policy towards the West and Africa, at the cost of weakening positions by withdrawal of troops from the East and the Balkan limes (Fine 1991, 23), were among crucial factors for the negative development of the situation throughout the rest of the century. Then followed a period of extreme decentralization and regionalization of the defensive organization and every attempt by the modern scholars to speak about systematic defense in the northern provinces should be seriously reconsidered. In the second half of the sixth century, everything came down to self-sufficiency and survival through decentralization and local management of defense and production. This tendency may be seen in a fortified settlement in Thrace and Dacia from the end of the fifth and the sixth centuries (Динчев 2006, 76). Asamus was defended by its local militia, a right given in a decree issued by the emperor Justin II (Theophylact Simocatta, History VII.3; Stričević 1961, 180). The self-defense by a local militia had been strictly forbidden during Justinian’s rule (Максимовић 1980, 40, footnote 118a). The need for local maintenance of the defense emerged as a consequence of the lost support and because of the lack of a well-trained mobile and organized army needed to stop the attacks or to buffer the speed of the raiders. Considering this behavior, ancient sources speak about the loss of loyalty of the local population and clergy. This is witnessed in the year 595 during the previously mentioned events around Asamus. As some scholars have stated, the Empire had no interest in protecting the provincial rural and civil population. The rebellion of Phocas and the death of Maurice in 602 marked the end of all hopes. The worst consequence of this struggle for the throne was the military abandonment of the Lower Danube limes in 604.

Future research should be focused on the evaluation of the Empire’s potential for dealing with problems during the period under consideration. It should be focused toward answering questions about the proportion of spontaneous reactions compared to measures taken as part of a deeper strategically developed plan. Other factors that should be evaluated are the level of success of these actions and the ability and time needed to respond to a newly developed situation. The effectiveness and the efficiency of the overall activity of the system in many fields are an additional source of information for future evaluation of the

general condition of the state during the early Byzantine period.

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Устойчивостта на лимеса и ефективността на отбранителната система на Балканите като отражение на общото разпадане на държавната система през ранновизантийския период

Християн Талевски

(резюме)

Статията започва с кратко въведение в историческия контекст и неговата корелация с резултатите от археологическите изследвания. Представени са селищната стратиграфия и археологическите находки от северните и централни балкански провинции. На настоящото ниво на проучванията, този подход е приет като най-подходящ за разбирането на укрепителната система в нейното развитие и с прилагането на различни мерки за защита. Това е част от стратегия за ефективна защита и сигурност както на границите, така и във вътрешността. Въпреки че ранновизантийският лимес по Дунав е проучван в миналото от редица учени, това изследване е фокусирано върху възможната връзка между развитието на лимеса и хронологията на евентуалните нападения на селища във вътрешността на Балканите. Дали и до каква степен резултатите от археологическите изследвания, които свидетелстват за промени в ранновизантийската архитектура и инфраструктура в редица населени места, могат да се свържат със събитията по лимеса? Това изследване се основава на някои публикувани хипотези, потвърдени от резултатите от последните археологически разкопки и изследвания. То от своя страна повдига и редица други въпроси като разпадането на системите на управление, администрацията и провинциалната сигурност, както и евентуалното заселване на алохтонно население.

През разглеждания период, империята не разполага с необходимия капацитет за поддържане на ефективна отбранителна стратегия на границите и във вътрешността. По тази причината тя не успява да се справи с част от предизвикателствата през V и VI в. През този период от съществено значение е постоянната нужда от малки, изключително мобилни и добре координирани военни части, както и способността им да обединят силите си за борба срещу групите нападатели. Отговорността за поддръжката на лимеса е оставена в ръцете на местните общности и чуждестранни неримски етнически елементи.

През разглеждания период можем да разграничим три етапа. Първият е до средата на VI в., когато империята има икономически капацитет за решаване на проблемите на лимеса, но общите демографски проблеми засягат набирането на кадри в армията. Става дума по-специално за управлението на Юстиниан I (527-565) и времето на неговото *Renovatio Imperii*. През втория етап, овхващащ първите десетилетия на втората половина на VI в., държавата е очевидно слаба и не успява да спре загубата на територии и системната дезинтеграция. През третия период (последните десетилетия на VI в.), е направен опит за стабилизиране, но системното унищожаване по границата и във вътрешността превръща този опит просто в удължаване на неизбежния край.

Последвалите междуособици за трона водят до изоставяне на Долнодунавския

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лимес през 604. Империята изживява срив в системата за управление и сериозен културен упадък, които не могат да се преодолеят въпреки предприети мерки за засилване на отбраната. Бъдещите изследвания трябва да се фокусират върху оценка на потенциала на империята да поддържа административно, данъчно, икономическо и военно влияние в различните региони.