

Introduction

In his recent book on *The Long Sixth Century in Eastern Europe*, Florin Curta, one of the premier scholars of the history of the Balkans in the 6th century, undertook an extremely ambitious project of surveying the social and economic history of a large area between the forest belts of Russia and the Greek mainland.¹ The book represents an inspiring and revolutionary attempt at a cross-regional study of archeology, social differentiation, modes of consumption, living patterns, and commercial and non-commercial exchanges throughout the long 6th century. One of his conclusions, focused on the Balkans in the period after his study, presents the region fairly grimly:

With the general withdrawal ca. 620, the central and northern Balkans experienced a serious demographic collapse and remained depopulated until at least the end of the century. No Slavs from the territories north of the river Danube rushed to grab the lands supposedly left behind by early Byzantine farmers, and no “remainder” who refused to go away took that opportunity to enlarge his property.²

In some respects, Curta’s conclusion is uncontroversial: the withdrawal of the Byzantine armies and administrative apparatus from the Balkans under the pressure of raids and invasions from beyond the Danube, the burned remains of fortresses, and the seeming lack of any signs of economic and social vitality in the Balkans, except for the coastal regions, have traditionally been seen as signs of depopulation, destruction, and abandonment. And yet, the idea of an empty landscape, filled by the emerging Bulgar state in the 680s, is a potential hotbed for irredentist historiography. This makes a methodologically sound evaluation of Curta’s conclusions important for students of history. In my senior thesis, I would like to put Florin Curta’s claims to closer

¹ Curta (7).

² Ibid. 314.

scrutiny by analyzing the archeological evidence he and other scholars present through the lens of a multidisciplinary and cross-temporal approach.

It is often said in archeology and history that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” and, while such a statement can itself be problematic and used as evidence for the presence of any phenomenon in any period, it remains an important methodological caveat. As historians, we should always consider our knowledge of any historical development as partial at best and misrepresented by our sources at the worst. The structure of academia as a set of highly specialized fields and our own personal biases (acknowledged or not) always skew our understanding of the evidence. Therefore, our best hope for meaningful research is to employ different methodologies and types of evidence, speak with experts in various sub-fields, and attempt to reconcile sometimes contradictory types of data into a common narrative for our period of study. This study will attempt to adopt such an interdisciplinary approach, which considers literary sources alongside archeological, numismatic, paleoenvironmental evidence, and identity studies. The goals of this project are threefold: to demonstrate that what may seem as an empty landscape in the Northern Balkans shows more evidence of continuity than what Curta has suggested, depending on the types of evidence one analyzes, that alternative anthropological theories from the perspective of the periphery can offer us different explanations of the observed changes in Balkan society in the 7th century than the “depopulation”, “destruction”, and “invasion”, which dominate scholarship, and that more comparative work with regions like Italy and the post-Roman West may shed more light upon the “Slav lands”.³ Instead of focusing on opposing concepts like “continuity” and “discontinuity”, “Byzantine” and “barbarian”, or “late Roman” or

³ As they were called by Chris Wickham in his influential monograph *Framing the early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800*.

“medieval”, we have to treat Balkan society on its own terms to accurately study its characteristic traits. The paper argues that what we see as an empty landscape is instead a region transformed from a highly militarized and centrally-controlled frontier area to a peripheral and highly segmented society.

It must be made clear that, in the completion of this senior thesis, I claim no finality regarding the conclusions of this work. Any type of written text is necessarily a product of its environment, its time period, and the types of evidence available to the writer. The latter is a particularly cumbersome problem for the study of the Balkans in the 7th century. The quantity of primary sources is negligible compared to other periods, the secondary studies are considerably less numerous than for adjacent centuries (such as the 6th and 8th centuries, the age of Justinian and Iconoclasm respectively) or even for other regions of the Mediterranean world in our period (notably Anatolia and the Near East). Moreover, scholarship on the region has yet to recover from its highly segmented, ethnocentric, and ideological legacy in the 20th century.⁴ But it is my hope that this project will spark interest in the subject matter and that future scholarship, particularly research that focuses on newer types of palynological, paleoenvironmental, and paleozootic evidence, may help clarify the processes that led Balkan society to appear radically different at the end of the 7th century from its antecedent structure in the 6th century.

Chapter two will contain a brief summary of the historical events of the late 6th and 7th centuries for readers unfamiliar with the history of the Balkans in the period. Chapter three will examine the most visible aspect of Balkan society, the aristocracy, and how it changed in the late 6th and 7th centuries. Chapter 4 will deal with the least visible members of society and examine the

⁴ Particularly on this problem, see Gândilă (3) 4–6.

question of the “Slavicization” of the Northern Balkans from the perspective of the periphery as opposed to the lens of Constantinople or the Avar heartland. Chapter 5 will present the major types of material evidence to qualify the concept of an empty landscape and its suitability for describing the Balkans in the 7th century. Chapter 6 will present a short recapitulation of the main conclusions of the preceding chapters and will discuss their implications before moving to potential suggestions for future intellectual inquiry.