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All roads lead to Constantinople:
Exploring the *Via Militaris* in the medieval Balkans,
600-1204



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Declaration

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources has been acknowledged.

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to provide an accurate depiction of the route and condition of the *Via Militaris*, the grand military highway that linked Belgrade and Constantinople, as it existed from the seventh century till the beginning of the thirteenth. It will consider the development of Roman roads in this region and how these changed, over time, into Byzantine roads. Further, the urban landscape of the Balkan Peninsula will be explored, from the changes wrought by the establishment of Roman authority, the impact of the Slav and Avar incursions, to what sort of settlements, if any, emerged afterwards. Finally the material effect this turmoil had on the administration and maintenance of the *Via Militaris*, and to what extent was the road restored after the Byzantine reconquest of the Balkans by Emperor Basil II, will be discussed.

This thesis draws upon a wide variety of sources, not only medieval texts, but those pertaining to the Roman and Ottoman periods as well, and marries these with material sources, such as archaeological investigations of the road and accompanying road stations, numismatic and sigillographic sources, as well as observations in the field of contemporary remains along its route. It also discusses how the contribution of new technologies, in particular the use of Geographical Information Systems and topographical data, can further enhance our understanding of historical landscapes and communication networks. Finally, through considering the passage of the German contingent of the Third Crusade as a case study, this thesis demonstrates how a greater awareness of the physical condition of the route can provide a context whereby such events might be more adequately critiqued.

Perhaps the most significant conclusion drawn by this thesis is the influence of topography on both the choice of route of the *Via Militaris*, and its subsequent prominence in the crusading period. The mountain passes through which the road travels are far less steep than might be assumed for a region that is largely defined by its rugged terrain, and over its entire course the road never attains the sort of gradients that would have rendered the use of wheeled vehicles impractical, if not outright impossible. This stands in stark contrast to the route of the *Via Egnatia*, which is far more precipitous, and this is one of the main reasons, it is argued, why the *Via Militaris* emerges as the primary road taken by those participants of the Second and Third Crusades who took the overland route to the Holy Land.

It also argues that the quality of the road was far from uniform during this period, and in particular from the mid-eleventh century onwards there is convincing evidence that the Byzantine state deliberately abandoned a long stretch of this road, between the Danube River and the city of Naissus, through a region known as the 'Bulgarian Forest', in order to create on its frontier a logistically

challenging 'no man's land'. The road which subsequently emerged in this region likely bore little resemblance to that of a well-travelled highway.

However despite its stated aim, this thesis has been unable to provide as clear a representation of the road at a local level as was hoped, and concludes that no such depiction is currently possible owing to a fundamental lack of research, in particular of verified archaeological remains, along much of its route. This is compounded by the fact that the sources make clear that a number of alternate routes not only existed, but were actively used, in the medieval era, and it is difficult to determine which road was being utilised at any given point in time. Instead of a single road, this thesis argues that the medieval *Via Militaris* instead more likely existed as a network of roads, as the decayed remains of the Roman highway, as well as lesser known secondary routes, were used in conjunction. The confusion which subsequently emerges in modern depictions of the route of the *Via Militaris* is evidenced by the sometimes vast differences which exist between them, and seldom are two maps of the route of the road alike.

It is argued that without further research to ascertain the quality and route of the road at a local level, the medieval *Via Militaris* cannot be described except in the most general of terms, and owing to this confusion the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman identities of the road have become irrevocably entwined. What is required, therefore, is a new emphasis on how the route of the road was influenced by, and in turn influenced, the development of unique local geographies, and from these geographies build a broader conception of the road as a whole. That is, rather than top down analysis of the road, our understanding of it, and its importance to the medieval Balkans, needs to be reconsidered from the bottom up.

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Finally I would like to thank my family for their ongoing support and infinite patience in my peculiar obsession with a strange road located on the other side of the world.

A note on transliterations

For the sake of consistency, I have endeavoured to use Latinised forms of Byzantine names of people and places wherever possible, whilst technical terms and titles have been transliterated from their Greek or Latin forms with as few changes as possible.

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Preface

With the foundation of Constantinople as the new Roman capital, the *Via Militaris* became arguably the most important strategic route in the entire Roman Empire, linking this vast urban metropolis, and the key cities of the Balkans, with Northern Italy and Central Europe. Yet what was this road like in the medieval era? A wealth of anecdotal information exists, but little in the way of definitive evidence. Whilst some major routes, such as the *Via Egnatia*, had become severely dilapidated by as early as the sixth century, the *Via Militaris* was still capable of accommodating the throngs of soldiers, wagons, and animals that swarmed over it during the passage of the first three crusades. Had the *Via Militaris* therefore been revived in the preceding centuries, or had it never been allowed to decline in the first place?

We know little of the actual physical condition of the road throughout this period. Literary sources typically offer little in the way of reliable information on routes or even locations, let alone the quality of roads themselves. Similarly the archaeological record along much of this route can only be described as patchy, with many surveys being limited to the late Roman period, and by modern national boundaries. The defining history of the road is still the late nineteenth century examination of it provided by Konstantin Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*.¹ Whilst the influence of Jireček's ground breaking work is without dispute, a number of conclusions he reached as to the route of the *Via Militaris* in particular do not stand up to close scrutiny. Given the importance of this route to the medieval Balkans, and in particular to the passage of the first three crusades, this is a topic that deserves to be considered anew.

The inspiration for this study has come from travel undertaken within the Balkans, and observations of how its unique geography has shaped and influenced the manner in which people travel and interact with this region even today. It was further felt that existing depictions of the region, within maps or historical atlases, failed to adequately portray its complex geography. Such depictions often seemed bland, devoid of necessary detail and with roads so marked that their passage seemed almost trivial. As one former lecturer remarked, these depictions gave the impression that for a crusader to travel from Belgrade to Constantinople, all he needed to do was put his horse into 'gear' and roll on down the highway.

¹ K. Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe: eine historisch-geographische studie* (Prague, 1887).

Further it was felt that the urban history of this region was poorly represented in existing sources. The wave of Slavic tribes which swept over the region in the sixth and seventh centuries is often argued to have destroyed the 'Roman' identity of the Balkans. We possess, though, little in the way of definitive evidence with which to argue either for or against this point. Those sites which are of interest to medieval historians, such as Philippopolis and Serdica, are also of interest to classical or ancient historians, and often we know more of their inhabitants in these periods than we do of their more recent medieval populations. Was it the case that the Greek or Roman identities of these cities were wiped out at a stroke? As Geoffrey Blainey notes in *The Tyranny of Distance*, identities can be changed more quickly on a map than they can in the mind.²

We don't know what was in the minds of those people who lived in this region, or who subsequently may have lived in its cities afterwards. Were these people Greeks? Slavs? Bulgars? Or something else entirely? We simply don't know for sure, and discussion on this issue has advanced little further than acceptance that such absolute divisions are extremely rare in practice, and what emerged instead was more likely a blend of peoples and cultures.³ If we can tell so little of these places, or even the people who inhabited them, might not we learn more by investigating how people interacted with the world around them, how they moved from place to place, between the town and the countryside, but more importantly, between the provincial towns and imperial capital, Constantinople. To better understand the difficult history of this region, it appears imperative to achieve a better appreciation of its communication routes.

It has been argued by historians such as John Haldon and John Pryor that medieval texts have now been mined to exhaustion for all the information they can provide on the topic of historical logistical networks. For a more detailed picture to emerge, new sources of information, especially in light of the economic and demographic changes experienced within the medieval Balkans, need to be explored if these networks are to be understood further. Study of the *Via Militaris*, however, is subject to an enormous diversity of specialist discourses, from geographers and archaeologists, to classicists and medieval historians. Alan Baker, in *Geography and History: bridging the divide*, argues for the need for a closer collaboration between these disciplines, and the necessity of promoting a common language in order to encourage meaningful dialogue.⁴ This thesis seeks to display an example of the utility offered by a cross-disciplinary approach which brings this material together into one argument, in which the whole can potentially become greater than the sum of its parts.

² G. Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: how distance shaped Australia's history* (Sydney, 2001), p. 341.

³ R. C. Hall, *The modern Balkans; a history* (London, 2011), p. 14.

⁴ A. Baker, *Geography and History: bridging the divide* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 2.

In doing so this thesis will take the Braudelian concept of the *longue durée* as both its conceptual and structural framework, in that only through an investigation of the relationship between history and geography over time can the importance and utility of a road such as the *Via Militaris* be effectively expressed. Geography is not merely a passive stage upon which historical events are played out, it exerts an important influence over them, shaping them and the furthermore providing a context in which they can subsequently be studied. Similarly this thesis will draw upon analogous studies of the road networks of Asia Minor, such as William Ramsay's *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor*, in which topography is argued to be a foundation upon which the analysis of historical events can be explored. It will also draw inspiration from Jireček's own pioneering approach in raising awareness of the importance of considering the history of the Balkan Peninsula in terms of its most convenient and strategically important route.

This is not to argue against the utility of studying specialised subjects within this setting, but rather that a better understanding of the physical framework in which cultural and social interactions occurred could make a positive contribution to our overall understanding of the history of this region. That is, it is necessary to conceptualise the importance of the route as a whole, as opposed to studying small sections of it in isolation, in particular since a large part of its subsequent prominence and fame was derived from the fact that this was the imperial highway, the road to Constantinople, or Tsargrad as it was also known in the Balkans. The status of this road was further enhanced by the fact that it entered the city via the monumental Golden Gate, and through the Theodosian Walls, symbols of the unconquerable status of the Roman Empire.

Cities along the *Via Militaris*, such as Philippopolis and Serdica, therefore did not exist inside vacuums, and the road itself which ran through them indelibly linked them to administrative bodies of imperial authority that were located within the capital. How these administrative mechanisms operated over space, however, is difficult to discern, and a more comprehensive appreciation of the means by which these cities were linked physically with the capital Constantinople would allow us a greater appreciation of not only how these regions were incorporated within the greater Byzantine 'Commonwealth', but also to analyse the formation of distinct urban communities within them, such as the heretical 'Manichean' population in Philippopolis.

Material and literary sources provide one way of looking at the historical world, but a consideration of geography offers an alternate, complimentary, perspective on the same topics, and so the road shall also be considered in terms of the landscape it encompasses, its topography and climate, as well as the human geography of those regions through which it ran. In this respect the study of historical geography is seen in terms of a compilation of a wide variety of different sources, not only literary

sources and material remains, but also climate, fluvial erosion, the impact of diseases such as malaria, and demographic change. Bringing this material together offers historians an opportunity to consider historical events from a wide variety of different perspectives not covered by a more traditional study of literary texts.

This approach raises certain dangers as well. How is material drawn from such a wide variety of sources to be balanced against each other? An imaginative reconstruction of the *Via Militaris*, as this must necessarily be owing to the fact that we simply do not know enough about the route to convincingly reconstruct its medieval identity in detail, inevitably requires dangerous assumptions to be drawn. The structuralism of the *longue durée* will, it is hoped, help in providing a convincing context in which to consider this variety of sources, for although the roads of the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman periods were manifestly different, of different compositions and occasionally following different routes, they all served the same essential purpose: the effective projection of imperial power and authority over the Balkan Peninsula. So whilst some of the conclusions reached by this thesis may subsequently attract criticism, it is felt that the attempt still ought to be made in order to hopefully promote a greater dialogue on the nature of the medieval *Via Militaris*. Indeed the main argument of this thesis is that historians should know far more about this road than is currently the case.

Finally, in order to demonstrate the practical applications and possibilities a greater appreciation of the route affords, a case study of the passage of the German contingent of the Third Crusade along the *Via Militaris* is presented. This event is often considered in terms of the personality clash between its two main actors; the stubbornness of Frederick Barbarossa on the one hand, against the paranoia of Isaac II Angelos on the other. What is typically underemphasised, however, in both medieval texts and contemporary histories of this event, is the geographical context in which these clashes occurred. The movement of vast crusader forces was first and foremost a formidable logistical exercise. By framing the passage of the Third Crusade within the context of the geography of the route and condition of the medieval *Via Militaris*, this thesis provides an example of how a closer examination of the physical settings in which these interactions occurred can enhance our understanding of such dramatic events, and deliver a more nuanced appreciation of the decisions made by those leaders involved.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Fernand Braudel described mountains as being conspicuous actors in the life of the medieval Mediterranean. Braudel marvelled at how these domineering geographical masses, whose slopes often run right down to the shores of the Mediterranean itself, are so often overlooked in studies of the region that historians who had never left the towns and their archives would be surprised to discover their existence.⁵ The mountain ranges of the Balkan Peninsula, perhaps better than any other region that borders the Mediterranean, have come to uniquely shape its history in a manifold number of ways. Rugged and densely forested, these ranges, along with the river valleys that bisect them, have dominated regional patterns of human migration and settlement for millennia.

Yet despite their often foreboding reputation the mountains of the Balkan Peninsula have, over time, provided refuge and sanctuary for a myriad of different population groups. Owing to competition over limited resources and outside pressures, the populations of these regions were constantly in flux, with transitory groups migrating between Asia Minor and the Danube River, whilst other more permanent settlers varied between the high land and the lower river valleys as season dictated. The historical geography of the Balkans has therefore typically been highly dynamic, with the region playing host to a number of different population groups throughout recorded history. This makes analysis of the cultural history of this region, especially during the medieval period, exceptionally difficult. The few sources that exist from this time, be they literary, archaeological, or epigraphical, can seldom be used to differentiate between the different groups that have historically inhabited the Balkan Peninsula, or, the ability of the medieval Byzantine state to exert any degree of influence over them. Indeed at times it is difficult to determine whether large parts of this region were inhabited at all.

This thesis will attempt to offer an alternative approach to these questions by evaluating the region primarily in regards to its distinctive geographical setting. It shall do so by exploring the *Via Militaris*, the main highway that bisected this region and ultimately terminated at Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire. Control over this route, usage of which dates back to antiquity, was of critical importance to the economic and political administration of the Balkans, as it offered by far the easiest and most direct access to the middle Danube, and in doing so passed *en route* the majority of major urban centres to be found in the region; Adrianople, Philippopolis, Serdica, Naissus, and Belgrade. In essence, this thesis seeks to expand upon existing analysis of human interaction over space within the

⁵ F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, trans. S. Reynolds, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (London, 1972), p. 29-30.

medieval Balkans by exploring it from its very lowest level, literally by studying what existed below people's feet.

Although some of its cities, such as Philippopolis and Naissus, Plovdiv and Niš in modern Bulgaria and Serbia respectively, attracted the envy of passing crusaders, the Balkans was never an especially rich region and as such Byzantium, aside from the agricultural exploitation of Thrace, likely gained relatively little economically from it. It was far more important, however, in strategic terms. Possession of this region afforded control over the most direct access routes to Thrace, and Constantinople beyond. Even as importantly it allowed the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire to reach the Danube River. Byzantium lacked the manpower and resources to hold this defensive line as the Romans had, but control over this geographical space allowed for an expansion of the empire's 'defensive potential', in that it increased the physical boundary that separated vital agricultural regions from those enemies who threatened them. Furthermore, establishing a presence along the Danube allowed the Byzantines to maintain contact with those living beyond and attempt to draw them, by tribute or religious conversion, into the fold of the Byzantine *Ecumene*. In effect, control over interior communication lines, such as the *Via Militaris*, allowed Byzantium to fulfil one of the crucial requirements of an empire: the effective projection of power over space.

The nations of the Balkans today are typically treated as autonomous units, divided geographically along religious, ethnic and cultural lines. However during the medieval period in question the mountain ranges likely proved not to be an insurmountable hindrance to the movement of those pastoral groups that settled in the region, or their seasonal migrations. In the classical world the river valleys acted as outlets leading towards the Aegean, and this role was reprised in the Middle Ages by crusaders and pilgrims seeking passage east to Constantinople and thence to the Holy Land beyond. Bulgaria, which sits astride the two major routes leading to the Aegean, the Struma and Maritsa Rivers, has historically been regarded as a 'transit' country, characterised by the movement and conquests of numerous peoples.⁶ Indeed in contemporary studies of the region there is an increasing tendency to eschew use of the word 'Balkan' because of the pejorative associations it attracts, and instead use the term 'Southeastern Europe', in order to emphasise this region's interconnectivity with the rest of the continent.⁷ The sheer number and variety of archaeological remains to be found in this region stands testament to the fact that it has acted as a conduit between Asia Minor and Central Europe since the

⁶ G. W. Hoffman, 'Transformation of rural settlement in Bulgaria', *Geographical Review*, 54, no. 1 (Jan, 1964), p. 45.

⁷ Hall, *The modern Balkans*, p. 21.

Stone Age, and at the heart of this lies in particular the Maritsa and Nishava River valleys, which, along with the Succi Pass, are corridors that would in time come to host the route of the *Via Militaris*.

Yet existing analysis of the *Via Militaris* has typically been both sporadic and uncoordinated. Surveys have usually been limited in spatial scope, focusing on short segments of the route, largely in connection with the major cities of the region, or constrained by modern national boundaries. Discussion has also typically been limited temporally as well, with the majority of investigations of the route usually focused on its existence in the late Roman period. Analysis of the Byzantine history of the road has been rare, and of its Ottoman identity rarer still.

Surveys of the *Via Militaris* as it existed in the late Roman period are useful to medieval scholars, but owing to the distinct demographical changes experienced within the Balkans after this period they must also be treated with some caution. The *Via Militaris* of the Byzantine period, that is to say from the seventh century onwards, was almost certainly a far different entity to that which had existed in the late Roman period. Population decline and political upheaval would have not only changed the physical appearance of the road, as some sections doubtlessly suffered through neglect, it likely also changed how the road was perceived more generally. As Harvey notes, societies construct objective conceptions of both time and space sufficient unto their own needs and purposes of material and social reproduction.⁸ As late Roman society collapsed both the form and function of what once had been a major imperial highway, especially within an increasingly isolated periphery, would have become materially different, and it is likely only along its final stretch through Thrace, as it approached the capital itself, did the *Via Militaris* retain some semblance of its former significance and identity.

As such, this thesis seeks to challenge depictions of the route as static, and relatively unchanged from its Late Antique form. The medieval *Via Militaris* typically exists as a diagonal line drawn in historical atlases and maps of the region, following the course of the ancient road and usually traversing a featureless vacuum punctuated only by the important cities that lay along its route. Topographical details in these representations are usually either entirely absent, or highly simplistic. As Goffart notes in his critique of the format, this image creates its own reality, and the long unbroken line that bisects the Balkan Peninsula in historical atlases gives rise to the belief that not only was the continued existence of a major highway a given constant in the history of this region, but that it was also presumably uniform in composition over the entirety of its extent.⁹

⁸ D. Harvey, 'Between space and time: reflection on the Geographical Imagination', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 80 (1990), p. 419.

⁹ W. A. Goffart, *Historical Atlases; the first three hundred years 1570-1870* (Chicago, 2003), p. 449.

Depictions of roads as linear, static lines on a map also often underemphasise the importance and complexity of communication networks such as the *Via Militaris*.¹⁰ The movement of men and material through space is only infrequently touched upon in historical sources and travellers seldom comment upon the nature of roads unless they happen to be exceptionally bad. It is typically only through military treatises and crusading records that any impression of the quality and importance of local roads can be gathered. This can sometimes lead to the assumption that travel was a mundane, even insignificant, practice, merely a case of following a road through a frictionless environment until it reached its destination. Yet travel, especially over long distances, was seldom straightforward in the Middle Ages. It was typically fraught with difficulties, not the least being the threat of banditry, and became especially hazardous over winter, or during spells of poor weather when available roads could become enormously difficult to traverse.

In particular a great deal can be learnt about the operation and planning of medieval military campaigns through the examination of logistical infrastructures. This can, in turn, be used to analyse underlying social structures. The mobilisation and deployment of armies for instance, along with the distribution of the requisite supplies and its modes of transportation, required integrated networks of social and administrative institutions. But the very existence of such administrative structures would challenge pre-existing depictions of the medieval Balkans, where other than a few isolated coastal communities, urban centres are often presumed to have been destroyed in the upheavals of the tumultuous seventh century. Moreover, whilst it is typically assumed that the Byzantine Empire utilised and maintained the decaying infrastructure it inherited from the late Roman Empire, the manner in which this was done, and how these road networks were maintained, has seldom been the subject of scholarly attention, or have been the subject of unproven assumptions rarely tested against evidence.¹¹

The Roman identity of the Balkans was unquestionably shattered by the inexorable wave of invaders who washed over it in the seventh century. Yet the absence of comprehensive evidence of both urban settlement and road construction has hampered the ability of historians to define just how far reaching the implications of this event was, and in particular challenge the depiction of a Balkan interior stripped of major cities. More recent studies, however, and archaeological surveys in particular, have suggested the possibility of persistent urban communities beyond the seventh century, even if they can tell us little of the inhabitants themselves. Moreover, from the mid-eleventh

¹⁰ For a critique of such approaches, see P. Hordell & N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea; a study of Mediterranean history* (Malden, 2000), p. 563.

¹¹ P. Murgatron *et al.*, 'Medieval Military Logistics: An agent-based simulation of a Byzantine army on the march', *Computational and Mathematical Organization Theory*, 18, no. 4 (December, 2012), p. 488.

century onwards the mass movement of pilgrim traffic along this route argues for at least the retention of functioning logistical networks, networks such as roads and bridges which were by then nearing one millennium of existence and could hardly have sustained themselves over such a long period of time.

Haldon argues that if the operation of these logistical networks is to be understood, historians are required to move beyond constant argument over the same sparse references in a few medieval texts.¹² If research on the manner in which these networks were maintained and utilised is to be lifted beyond the level of generalisations, new approaches need to be considered. This thesis will attempt to offer one such approach, and focus directly upon the medieval *Via Militaris* itself, providing as accurate as possible description of its course, the quality of the road surface, its width, the regions that it encompassed, and in what respect the road may have differed from those which existed in the Roman and Ottoman periods. This information will then be used to model the passage of a particular army along it, the German contingent of the Third Crusade as led by Frederick Barbarossa, in order to demonstrate the sorts of challenges such a journey entailed.

Given the highly fluid nature of debates pertaining to the urban settlements of the Balkan Peninsula and their associated cultural identities in the Middle Ages, this thesis will only be able, at best, to briefly touch upon them, and even then only insofar as they directly relate to the mechanics of road construction and repair. The settlement of diverse ethnic groups, their relationship with the Byzantine state, and the spread of orthodox Christianity, for instance, will be largely passed over. Indeed the intention of this thesis is that it will provide a material foundation upon which further analysis of the cultural history of the region can be undertaken.

It is necessary, however, to define the practical limitations that unavoidably narrow the scope of this research. By far the most important is the lack of verified archaeological evidence of the remains of the *Via Militaris*. Only a few sections of the road's surface have been subjected to archaeological excavations, and equally few roadside stations have been explored in any great detail. It is important, too, that some of these works exist only in the Bulgarian language, which the author is unfamiliar with, and is then indebted to such compilations as the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* series, or contemporary archaeologists such as Dr Mitko Madzharov, who have endeavoured to make such material available to the wider academic community. Nevertheless such sources can be scarce, and determining the route of the road, therefore, is often a case of landscape analysis coupled with what information can

¹² J. Haldon, 'Roads and communications in the Byzantine Empire: wagons, horses, and supplies', in J. Pryor ed., *Logistics of warfare in the age of the Crusades: proceedings of a workshop held at the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 30 September to 4 October 2002* (Aldershot, 2006), p. 131.

be gleaned from available literary and archaeological sources. This method is, of course, not an exact one, and in some regions, and in particular along the Morava River, the absence of evidence means the route of the medieval road can only be delineated in the most general of terms.

Nevertheless, it is felt that a more detailed examination of the *Via Militaris*, the region's single most important transport route, can make a vital contribution to our understanding of the medieval Balkans. The ability of travellers or armies to progress along this road, and the difficulties encountered owing to its quality, or natural obstacles such as mountain passes or narrow river valleys, are important considerations when it comes to determining the development over time of the Balkans as a distinct Byzantine 'space'. As Collingwood argued when considering the Roman road network of Ancient Britain, civilisation is transportation.¹³ The distances which separated the major settlements along its route from Constantinople both limited and contested the projection of Byzantine authority over this region, whose more distant communities were likely more tightly integrated into local networks of trade and cultural exchange, than they were with a distant imperial capital. A study of the material identity of the road, and the regions it encompassed, therefore affords the ability to examine these connections in practice, and thus identify some of the weaknesses inherent in traditional approaches to both medieval road networks and the historical geography of the Balkans as a whole.

This work will therefore necessarily touch upon many different strands of historical enquiry: histories of urban settlement, administrative structures, military histories, and cultural histories. Whilst influencing and being influenced in turn by all of the above, the history of the *Via Militaris* does not truly belong to any one of these categories either. In this sense the road itself forms the direct body of enquiry, and its existence throughout the Middle Ages, it will be argued, represents a definable structure whose influence can be traced over a long time span. In the context of the tumultuous medieval history of the Balkan Peninsula the road, and the landscape it traverses, will be considered as one of the primary means by which the overarching historical developments that affected the region were shaped.

¹³ R. G. Collingwood, *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (London, 1930), p. 1.

Chapter 2: The Geography of the Balkan Peninsula

The Balkan Peninsula is bound by the Adriatic, Ionian, Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, together with the Danube River to the north, and in total covers an area of approximately 666,000 square kilometres. It is dominated by a number of mountain ranges that run both east-west and north-south. The main ranges of the peninsula are the Central Balkan (the ancient Haimos range, known as the Stara Planina in modern Bulgaria, literally the 'old mountains'), Rila, Rhodope and Pirin Mountains. Running parallel and to the south of the Central Balkans Mountains is the Sredna Gora range, over which the *Via Militaris* passes directly. The region is also defined by the course of a number of major river systems, most notably the Danube River, which marks its northern extent, and those rivers which provide the easiest means by which the mountain ranges can be traversed, such as the Morava, Nishava, Maritsa and Tundzha, along with their smaller tributaries (Figure 1).

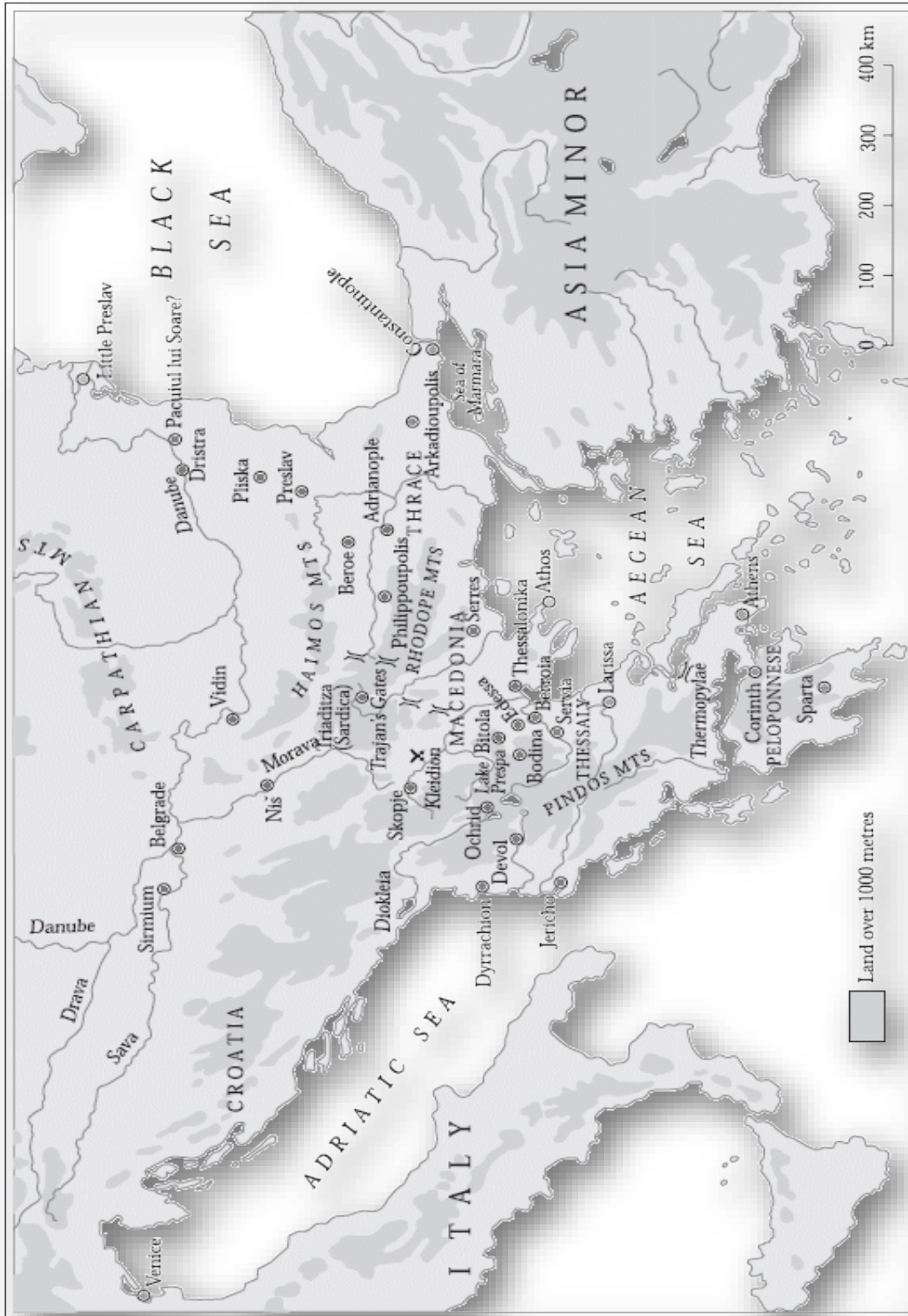


Figure 1: The Medieval Balkans. From C. Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire, 976-1025* (Oxford, 2005), p. 397.

Belonging to the Thraco-Macedonian massif, the ranges of the southerly Rila and Rhodope mountains are typically higher than those of the Central Balkan or Sredna Gora, and the highest peak in the region is Mount Musala, at 2925 metres, in the Rila Mountains. Ridges in the Central Balkan Mountains are typically located at 1600 metres, whilst the highest peak in the Sredna Gora range is 1604 metres above sea level. The distinctive features of these more northerly ranges are well rounded summits (the result of long erosion of rock formations that were mostly formed in the Mesozoic period) with heavily forested slopes, although generally southern slopes are steeper and barer.¹⁴

There are few passes through the sheer Rila and Rhodope ranges, which as well as being higher are also more rugged than the Central Balkan Mountains, and access to the Aegean coast therefore largely occurs via the valleys of the Vardar and the Struma rivers. The Mesta River (known as the Nestos in Greece) also connects the Maritsa Valley with the Aegean, but owing to the sparse archaeological record it is extremely difficult to determine whether this was also a major transport route, linking the city of Nicopolis ad Nestum with Thrace.¹⁵ Instead, Nicopolis was more probably linked to the Maritsa Valley via a trans-Rhodopean road that passed through the modern Bulgarian town of Dospat, although owing to the narrowness of this road it was likely never a major thoroughfare, and certainly not one capable of accommodating large numbers of marching men.

There are numerous passes through the Central Balkan ranges however, the most famous being the Varbitsa Pass, where the Bulgar Khan Krum ambushed the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus in 811 AD, and the Shipka Pass, where in 1877-8 a combined Russo-Bulgarian force held back numerous assaults from Ottoman forces attempting to break through the narrow pass and relieve the siege of Plevna. Other passes include the Troyan, or Beklemento, Pass situated north of the city of Plovdiv, along which ran a Roman road, the *Via Trajana*, linking the Maritsa Valley with the legionary forts located in Moesia, and the Iskar Gorge which runs north from the city of Serdica (Figure 2). These passes are easier to negotiate coming from the direction of the Danube, where the slopes of the Central Balkan Mountains shelve gently upwards from the Danubian plain, then they are from the south, where they steeply drop into the Maritsa Valley.¹⁶

¹⁴ Z. H. Archibald, *The Odrysian Kingdom of Thrace: Orpheus unmasked* (Oxford, 1998), p. 11-2.

¹⁵ P. Delev, 'The middle Mesta region in antiquity', in P. Delev & D. Vulcheva eds., *Koprivlen Archaeological Site: Rescue Investigations along Gotse Delchev - Drama Road, 1998-1999, Vol. 1* (Sofia, 2002), p. 27-8.

¹⁶ P. Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria, 775-831* (Leiden, 2012), p. 51.

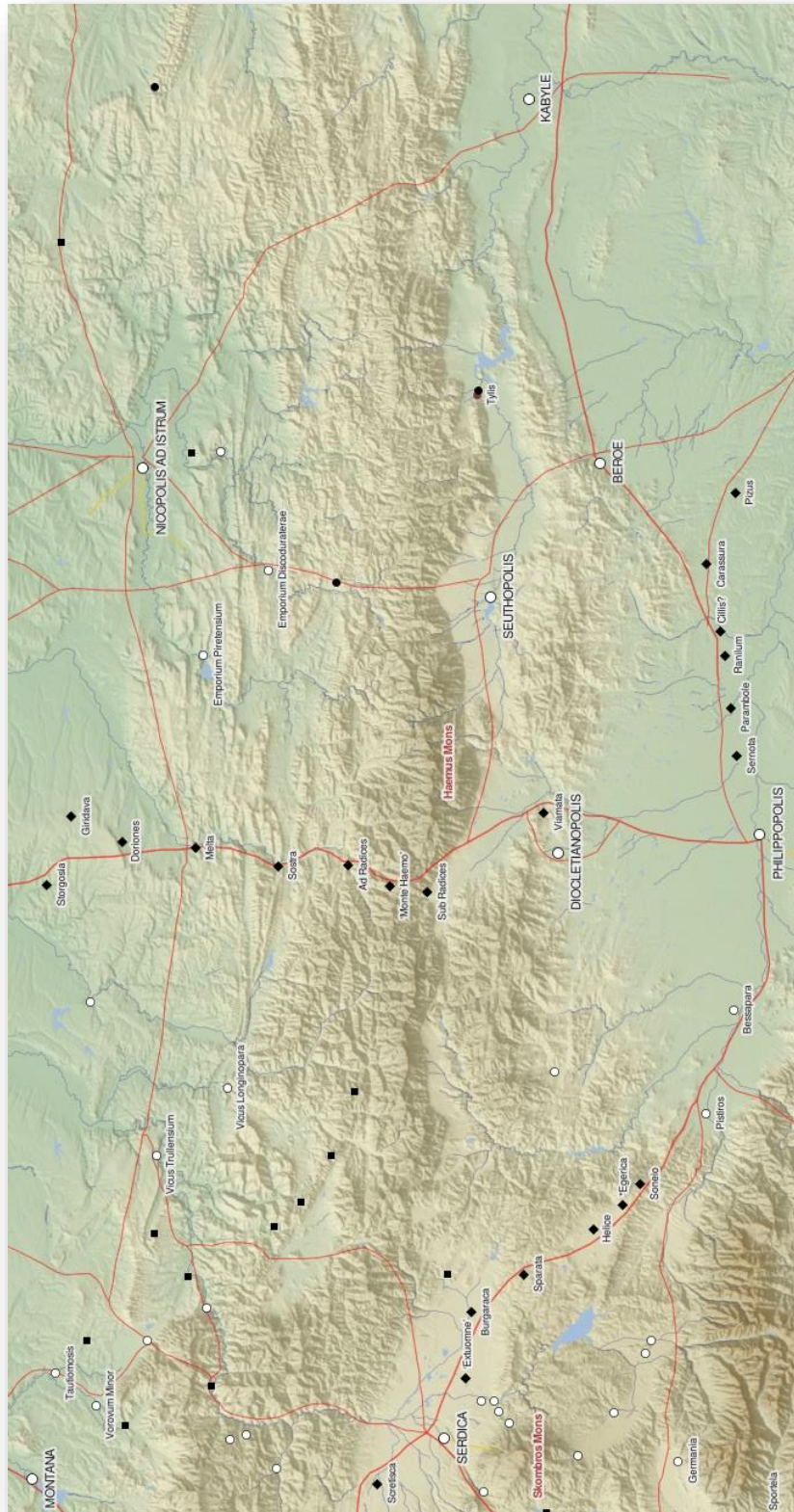


Figure 2: The major Roman passes of the Central Balkan Mountains, from left to right are the Iskar Gorge, the Troyan Pass, and Shipka Pass located above the city of Beroe. The Varbitsa Pass is not shown but is located in the eastern half of the range, near the modern city of Shumen. Map captured from <http://pleiades.stoa.org/>

Moreover, the passes further to the east, as the mountains fall away into the Black Sea, are more accessible than those to the west, which are generally narrow and densely forested, making them ideal locations for ambushes.¹⁷ Emperor Isaac Angelos was caught in one such pass in 1191, after a failed expedition to drive the Vlachs from the mountain passes.¹⁸ By the beginning of the twentieth century only the Shipka Pass was considered navigable for wheeled traffic, although even then only with a great deal of difficulty.¹⁹ Nevertheless, passage across the Central Balkan range was far from impossible, and it therefore did not represent as insurmountable barrier as might be assumed. Michael Attaleiates, for instance, mentions the numerous passes through which a hostile army might travel in order to raid Thrace.²⁰

The Sredna Gora Mountains meanwhile run west to east and are located between the Central Balkan and Rhodope ranges. They are typically extremely rugged on their slopes, featuring winding and densely forested valleys. Although the mountains are not remarkably high, owing to the irregular position, steepness and narrowness of the valleys running between them, which tend to run in numerous directions, they are quite difficult to cross.²¹ The Succi Pass, holding almost a due southeasterly course over its entire extent, is a notable exception to this, and thus offers the most direct route by which the Sredna Gora can be traversed on an east-west axis. There is, however, another potential route through the Sredna Gora in this direction, through the 'Molina Klissura', or 'Maiden's Gorge', that follows the course of the Maritsa River, some ten kilometres to the south of the Succi Pass, and is today followed by the modern trans-Bulgarian train line. This was in the medieval period, however, a much more difficult route, and it is arguable that it was ever used by large armies in the period in question.²² More will be said of these routes below.

The mountain ranges also play a decisive role in shaping weather patterns over the region. The climate of the Balkan Peninsula is influenced by intensive atmospheric circulation from the Atlantic Ocean coast, continental Europe, the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea. Weather patterns are generally of a continental European type, characterised by warm summers, cold winters and rainfall that is, whilst heaviest in summer, generally distributed throughout the year.²³ Cold northerly winds blow across the

¹⁷ P. von Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos) Tabula Imperii Byzantini Vol. 6* (Vienna, 1991), p. 53-4.

¹⁸ Nicetas Choniates, *Historia*, trans. H. Magoulias, *O City of Byzantium* (Detroit, 1984), p. 236. Also see R. L. Wolff, 'The "Second Bulgarian Empire" Its Origin and History to 1204', *Speculum*, 24, no. 2 (Apr, 1949), p. 185-6. Brand argues that the pass was actually located in the eastern flank of the Sredna Gora range, C. Brand, *Byzantium confronts the West: 1180-1204* (Michigan, 1968), p. 93.

¹⁹ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria* (London, 1920), p. 24.

²⁰ M. Attaleiates, *The History*, trans. A. Kaldellis & D. Krallis (Washington D.C., 2012), p. 65.

²¹ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 26-7.

²² Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos) Tabula Imperii Byzantini, Vol. 6*, p. 134

²³ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 15.

region in the winter months as a consequence of the high pressure systems that largely prevail over much of the European continent, as opposed to the belt of low pressure that occupies the basin of the Mediterranean, which leads to low winter temperatures and heavy snowfalls.²⁴

The Maritsa Valley and the Thracian plain are largely protected from these weather patterns however, and in particular from the northerly winds by the Central Balkan Mountains, and as a consequence a more Mediterranean climate prevails there as opposed to much of the rest of the region. Well-watered and with an agreeable climate, experiencing in particular mild winter and autumn frosts that seldom damages growth, they were consequently the principal grain-growing regions within the Byzantine empire after the loss of its Egyptian provinces in the early seventh century.²⁵ Moreover they produced large quantities of olive oil, wine and barely, most of which was likely designated for consumption by the Constantipolitan market.²⁶

The soils along the rivers of Thrace and the Maritsa Valley are also particularly well suited to agricultural exploitation, being enriched by nutrients washed down from the surrounding mountains. In comparison, the heavily forested mountain slopes are typically extremely poorly suited to agricultural activity, as most of the nutrients have been leached from the soils, leading to low levels of phosphates and nitrogen.²⁷ One exception however, is the Sredna Gora range, whose round summits and relatively low altitudes makes them ideally suited for use as summer pasture land.

Rainfall in Thrace and the Maritsa Valley is highly seasonal, and sudden heavy downfalls are quite common during summer in particular, which can lead to flash flooding. Those areas that neighbour the Mediterranean itself typically experience much warmer and dryer summers however. In comparison rainfall in the Sofia plain is more evenly distributed throughout the year, although large downfalls in the surrounding Rhodope and Rila mountains during both summer and winter are not uncommon. Snowfalls are also naturally heavier in these regions, and even today heavy snowfalls can still block roads for considerable periods. In the river valleys snowfalls can occasionally be considerable but far less dramatic than those experienced in the mountains, and along the coast snow is a relatively rare occurrence.²⁸

Plant life in the region varies considerably depending on altitude and seasonal rainfall, although human activity has also played a major role in shaping vegetation patterns. On the plains south of the Danube the existence of loess soils (silt soils formed by the northerly winds, which are

²⁴ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 39.

²⁵ J. L. Teall, 'The grain supply of Byzantine Empire, 330-1025', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 13 (1959), p. 122-25.

²⁶ M. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300-1450* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 52.

²⁷ Archibald, *The Odryian Kingdom of Thrace*, p. 17-8.

²⁸ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 43.

characteristically highly fertile) led to extensive forest steppe vegetation, although today this has been mostly cleared. The mountain slopes are covered with thick deciduous forests; Hornbeam being the dominant species on northern slopes and Oak on southern, although the overall biological diversity of these regions is extraordinarily high. In comparison the Maritsa Valley and Thrace are sparsely forested, and this is believed to be largely owing to massive deforestation undertaken by early human settlements, and dated by pollen samples to have occurred between the Neolithic and Early Iron Age.²⁹

The Balkan Peninsula can, therefore, be roughly split into two regions, one in the north-west featuring a continental European climate, and the other in the south-east with a more Mediterranean climate. Beyond this however, such easy divisions are harder to define. Many of the mountain ranges that bisect the region are not as difficult to traverse as first impressions might suggest, and in particular the many passes through the Central Balkan range, and valleys of the Morava, Nishava, Struma, Maritsa and Vardar rivers offer passage both on a north-south and east-west axis. The Rila and Rhodope ranges, meanwhile, are daunting obstacles, and the densely forested slopes that comprise much of the rest of the region represent formidable barriers to the movement of large numbers of marching men in particular. Indeed, approximately 80% of the total surface area of the Balkan Peninsula is categorised as mountainous terrain.

As a consequence, the majority of large urban settlements are to be found along the major river systems. The ease of communications and agriculturally fertile land these offer make the river valleys far better suited to accommodating large populations than the rugged, densely forested, environment that constitutes much of the rest of the Balkans. The region does possess valuable mineral resources, but these are typically located some distance away from these major population centres, making their exploitation difficult. Indeed, aside from those ancient cities that predated Roman occupation of the Central Balkans, and which exploited the agricultural potential of the river valleys, population density in the region has historically been extremely low, with much of the population residing in relatively isolated rural communities, a pattern that the Balkans retained right up until the mid-twentieth century.

²⁹ Archibald, *The Odryian Kingdom of Thrace*, p. 19-21. On historic changes to vegetation patterns in Bulgaria see in particular E. D. Bozilova & S. B. Tonkov, 'The impact of man on the natural vegetation in Bulgaria from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages', in S. Bottema, G. Entjes-Nieborg & W. Van Zeist eds., *Man's role in the shaping of the Eastern Mediterranean landscape: proceedings of the INQUA/BAI Symposium on the impact of ancient man on the landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean Region and the Near East, Groningen, Netherlands, 6-9 March 1989* (Rotterdam, 1990).

Chapter 3: Sources

Given how prominent a role the *Via Militaris* has played in the history of the Central Balkans, it is surprising how little attention the route has subsequently been given. In historical surveys of the Balkan Peninsula it is usually overshadowed by the older, and far more famous, *Via Egnatia*. To take just one example, in his survey of the history of the Balkan Peninsula, Richard Hall twice refers to the *Via Egnatia*, and its importance as a route between Rome and Constantinople, but only once to the road which ran from Naissus to the capital, and then not even by name.³⁰ Similarly, in Toynbee's survey of the world of Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus the road is likewise mentioned just the once, and again only in passing.³¹ This lack of recognition is curious, as the *Via Militaris* was the main road by which the Imperial capital, Constantinople, was reached from both Northern Italy and Central Europe. It was also the route by which Gothic and Hunnic invaders penetrated into the rich province of Thrace, over which pilgrims and crusaders travelled *en route* to the Holy Land, and the setting for defining military engagements, such as the Battle of Adrianople (378), the Bulgar ambush of Emperor Basil II at the Gates of Trajan (986), and the Battle of Slivnitsa (1885).

Part of this may be due to, or even the result of, a lack of a consistently identifiable name for the road. Its most common name is attributable to the nineteenth century study of the road by Konstantin Jireček, who determined that the Romans had called the route the *Via Militaris*. This interpretation is based on Jireček's translation of a Latin inscription, carved into a bare rock face near the city of Philippopolis, that lists a decree from Emperor Nero for the construction of road stations, '*tabernas et praetoria*'. However rather than referring explicitly to a single road, as Jireček concluded, the inscription referred to the construction of stations along all the military roads of Thrace, of which there were several. That is it uses the plural *vias militaris*, not the singular *via militaris*.³²

³⁰ Hall, *The modern Balkans*, p. 13.

³¹ A. Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World* (Oxford, 1973), p. 358.

³² K. Belke, 'Roads and travel in Macedonia and Thrace in the middle and late Byzantine period', in R. Macrides ed., *Travel in the Byzantine world: papers from the thirty-fourth spring symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, April 2000* (Birmingham, 2002), p. 74. For the text of the inscription in full see G. Rushforth, *Latin Historical Inscriptions: illustrating the history of the early empire* (Oxford, 1893), p. 116.

divi Claudi f(i)lius,
Germ(an)ici Caesaris n(e)pos,
Ti(ber)i Caesaris Aug(usti)
pron(e)pos, divi Aug(usti) abn(e)pos,
Caesar Aug(ustus) Germ(an)icus,
pontif(ex) max(im)us, trib(un)icia pot(estate)
VIII, imp(er)ator VIII, co(n)s(ul) IIII,
p(ater) p(at)riae,

Via Militaris was, therefore, likely never the name of the Roman road, as is often claimed; instead it was purely a technical description, in that the road was constructed for military purposes and was a carriage road wide enough to allow two-wheeled vehicles to pass each other.³³ In the Roman period the road may instead have been known as the *Via Singidunum*. In Byzantine sources the road was occasionally referred to as the *Basilike Hodos* or *Via Regia* (Royal Road), and in crusader sources it was sometimes referred to as 'Trajan's road', or simply the 'public road'.³⁴ In the Ottoman period it was known as the *Stamboulyol*, whilst sometimes named in Western sources as the *Via Trajana*. Intriguingly, three texts of the First Crusade, the anonymous *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolymitanorum*, and the works of Peter Tudebode and Robert of Reims, all state that the force led by Godfrey of Bouillon followed 'Charlemagne's' road to Constantinople.³⁵ The reference in the *Gesta Francorum* reads, '*Isti potentissimi milites et alii plures quos ignoro venerunt per viam quam iam dudum Karolus Magnus mirificus rex Franciae aptari fecit usque Constantinopolim.*'³⁶ Whether or not this passage indicates that the crusaders saw themselves as deliberately following in Charlemagne's footsteps, or if the author of the text was simply adding a piece of historical information about the road for the benefit of his audience, is unclear.³⁷ In Bulgaria the name *Via Diagonalis* is generally preferred, however in modern Western literature the name *Via Militaris* is predominately used, and will also be employed here in order to avoid confusion.

The absence of scholarly attention given to the *Via Militaris*, however, is almost certainly a consequence of the lack of literary sources concerning the route. Contemporary accounts of the road are rare; the cities along the route, such as Serdica, Philippopolis and Adrianople, typically excited comment, but the road surface itself did not. Often all that is available for the historian to analyse are the number of days it took to reach each city. For example, the Greek diplomat and historian Priscus, journeying to the Hunnic court in 448/9, provided detailed descriptions of the conditions he encountered in cities he visited *en route*, however as for the journey itself all the information that is

*tabernas et praetoria
per vias militares
feri iussit per
T(itum) Iulium Ustum proc(uratorem)
provinciae Thrac(iae).*

³³ R. Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, trans. N. H. Field (London, 1976), p. 16.

³⁴ Belke, 'Roads and travel in Macedonia and Thrace in the middle and late Byzantine period', p. 303.

³⁵ M. Gabriele, *An Empire of Memory: the legend of Charlemagne, the Franks, and Jerusalem before the First Crusade* (Oxford, 2011), p. 65. Gabriele, however confuses the route taken by Godfrey for the *Via Egnatia*, when it was in fact the *Via Militaris*.

³⁶ *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolymitanorum*, trans. R. Hill, *The Deeds of the Franks and Other Pilgrims to Jerusalem* (London, 1962), p. 2-3.

³⁷ For more on this debate see A. A. Latowsky, *Emperor of the World: Charlemagne and the construction of Imperial authority, 800-1229* (Ithaca, 2013), p. 216.

provided is a comment that it took thirteen days for an unladen traveller to reach Serdica from Constantinople.³⁸ It is not till the crusading period that more detailed descriptions are made available, although even then they are not comprehensive, and tend only to highlight where travel was difficult.

3.1: Archaeological Sources

The most accurate means of determining the route of the *Via Militaris* is through investigation of the remains of the road itself. Unfortunately few segments have as yet been the subject of archaeological excavations. Two sections of the original Roman road have recently been examined, one located near the Serbian town of Dimitrovgrad, and the other near the remains of a Roman station in eastern Bulgaria, the *mutatio* Castra Rubra.³⁹ Certainly further excavation of the road's surface is the one area where the most progress could currently be made. However such research, where it exists, is proceeding only sporadically, and even then often focused instead on routes that branched off from the *Via Militaris*. One reason for this is that the development of the Ottoman road, and later infrastructure, including modern roads, highways and railways, has frequently rendered access to the original road bed of the *Via Militaris* difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, owing to the decline in state funding that accompanied the collapse of the Communist states through which the road ran, 'rescue archaeology' of sites uncovered by modern road construction is increasingly the prevalent means by which the original road has become the subject of archaeological study.⁴⁰ The recent excavation of the road surface near Dimitrovgrad belongs to this class of research, which is by definition necessarily haphazard in its execution, being uncovered during the construction of a new trans-European highway.

The inscriptions found on milestones are also a first-rate resource for tracing the route of the road. To inform travellers of the distance to the next town or station, *milliaria* were positioned to mark every mile. These columns were constructed of cylindrical stones (typically either basalt, granite, limestone or sandstone) and stood between two and four metres tall.⁴¹ The inscriptions on *milliaria* provide a great deal of information, not only just distances but also information about the road, who built it and

³⁸ Priscus, *Historia*, trans. R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus, Vol. II* (Liverpool, 1983), p. 247.

³⁹ M. Lazic, 'Via militaris - римски друм код Цариброда', ГЛАСНИК ДРУШТВА КОНЗЕРВАТОРА СРБИЈЕ, 35 (2011) [in Serbian].

⁴⁰ F. Curta, 'Medieval Archaeology in South-Eastern Europe', in R. Gilchrist & A. Reynolds eds., *Reflections: 50 years in Medieval Archaeology, 1957-2007* (Leeds, 2009), p. 194.

⁴¹ M. Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria. Contribution to the Development of Roman Road System in the Provinces of Moesia and Thrace* (Veliko Tarnovo, 2009), p. 57.

when. In later periods they were also typically used to display imperial propaganda. These signposts were a regular feature of the Roman road network and large numbers of them have been located along the route of the *Via Militaris*.⁴² However for reasons that are largely unknown, but probably associated with the disintegration of late Roman administration, from the fifth century onwards the use of *milliaria* sharply declined and no milestones after this period have been found. The lack of *milliaria*, or other similar inscriptions, is one of the main reasons why it is so difficult to trace the development of road networks after the late Roman period.

Numismatic and sigillographic evidence can also make an important contribution to our understanding of the Byzantine road network and its operation. For instance a tenth century seal from Constantinople denotes that a certain Demetrios held the title of Imperial *spatharokandidatos* and *chartouarios of the dromos of the West*.⁴³ The office of the *dromos* will be further discussed below, however it is believed that one responsibility of the office was maintenance of roads and bridges. The ambiguity which surrounds the responsibilities of particular offices denoted on such seals, however, necessitates caution in their use. Numismatic evidence is also valuable in detailing the disruption to the local economy in this region caused by the Slav and Avar incursions of the sixth and seventh centuries, and the volume of seals and coins discovered in a location can provide a great deal of information about the routes and tempo of communications, and the flow of command in the provinces.⁴⁴

3.2: Itineraria

The most widely used means of determining the course of Roman roads is through the use of classical *itineraria*. Three major itineraries have been preserved; the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, and the *Itinerarium provinciarum Antonini Augusti*. All of these provided practical

⁴² Perhaps the most comprehensive compilation of *milliaria* along the *Via Militaris* is found in E. Kalinka, *Antike denkmäler in Bulgarien* (Vienna, 1906) & V. Beševliev, *Spätgriechische und spätlateinische Inschriften aus Bulgarien* (Berlin, 1964).

⁴³ N. Oikonomides & J. Nesbitt eds., *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art, Vol. 1* (Washington D.C., 1991), p. 3-4.

⁴⁴ For example see D. Metcalf, 'Avar and Slav incursions into the Balkan peninsula (c.575-625): the nature of the numismatic evidence', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 4 (1991), and Y. Yurukova, 'Byzantine Fortresses to the south of the Hemus Mountain in the light of coin finds from the last decades of the sixth century', in V. Gyuzelev & K. Petkov eds., *Church and State: studies in medieval Bulgaria and Byzantium* (Sofia, 2011), also see M. McCormick, 'Byzantium on the move: imagining a communications history', in R. Macrides ed., *Travel in the Byzantine world; papers from the thirty-fourth spring symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, April 2000* (Birmingham, 2002), p. 12.

information for travellers, in particular names of locations where lodging could be found, and the distances between them. In this capacity the straightness of Roman roads, with its regular system of *milliaria*, were a great aid to travellers moving from one place to another, in that they created a familiar and readily understandable landscape. They were also much used by Roman armies, and the military manual of Vegetius suggests that *itineraria* were often accompanied by coloured drawings (*picta*).⁴⁵

Of the three itineraries the *Tabula Peutingeriana* is the most well-known. The copy we possess today is a medieval copy of a fourth century painted map (*itinerarium pictum*).⁴⁶ The heritage of the original is disputed and it may itself have been a copy of an even older map made in the first or second century.⁴⁷ One argument is that the map, which is near seven metres long and divided into twelve segments, was produced specifically to adorn Diocletian's palace at Spalato.⁴⁸ Land is drawn in a deformed 1:21 scale, whilst the roads are drawn in red, with stations marked along their length (Figure 3).⁴⁹ The stations and cities on the map are represented differently depending on their relative importance, typically ranging from one tower to multiple towers for smaller towns and cities, whilst the major urban centres (Rome, Constantinople and Antioch) are given divine personifications. Although the heavily deformed scale of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* is atypical of Roman *picta*, it otherwise represents a classic example of Roman map making, in that they tended to ignore scientific representations of land-shapes, and instead simply required their maps to provide practical information, such as road distances and amenities along the way.⁵⁰ However it should not be overlooked that the *Tabula Peutingeriana* still contains a great wealth of geographical information, including naming rivers, deserts, and mountains.

⁴⁵ Vegetius, *Vegetii epitoma rei militaris*, trans. N. P. Milner, *Vegetius: epitome of military science* (Liverpool, 1993), p. 71.

⁴⁶ Theophanes, *The Journey of Theophanes; travel, business and daily life in the Roman east*, trans. J. Matthews (Boston, 2006), p. 71.

⁴⁷ R. J. A. Talbert, *Rome's World: the Peutinger Map reconsidered* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 134.

⁴⁸ Talbert, *Rome's World: the Peutinger Map reconsidered*, p. 144-5.

⁴⁹ Talbert, *Rome's World: the Peutinger Map reconsidered*, p. 88.

⁵⁰ Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, p. 29, also see O. A. W. Dilke, 'Itineraries and Geographical Maps in the Early and Late Roman Empires', in J. B. Harley & D. Woodward, eds. *The History of Cartography, Vol 1: Cartography in prehistoric, ancient and medieval Europe and the Mediterranean* (Chicago, 1987), p. 234-257.

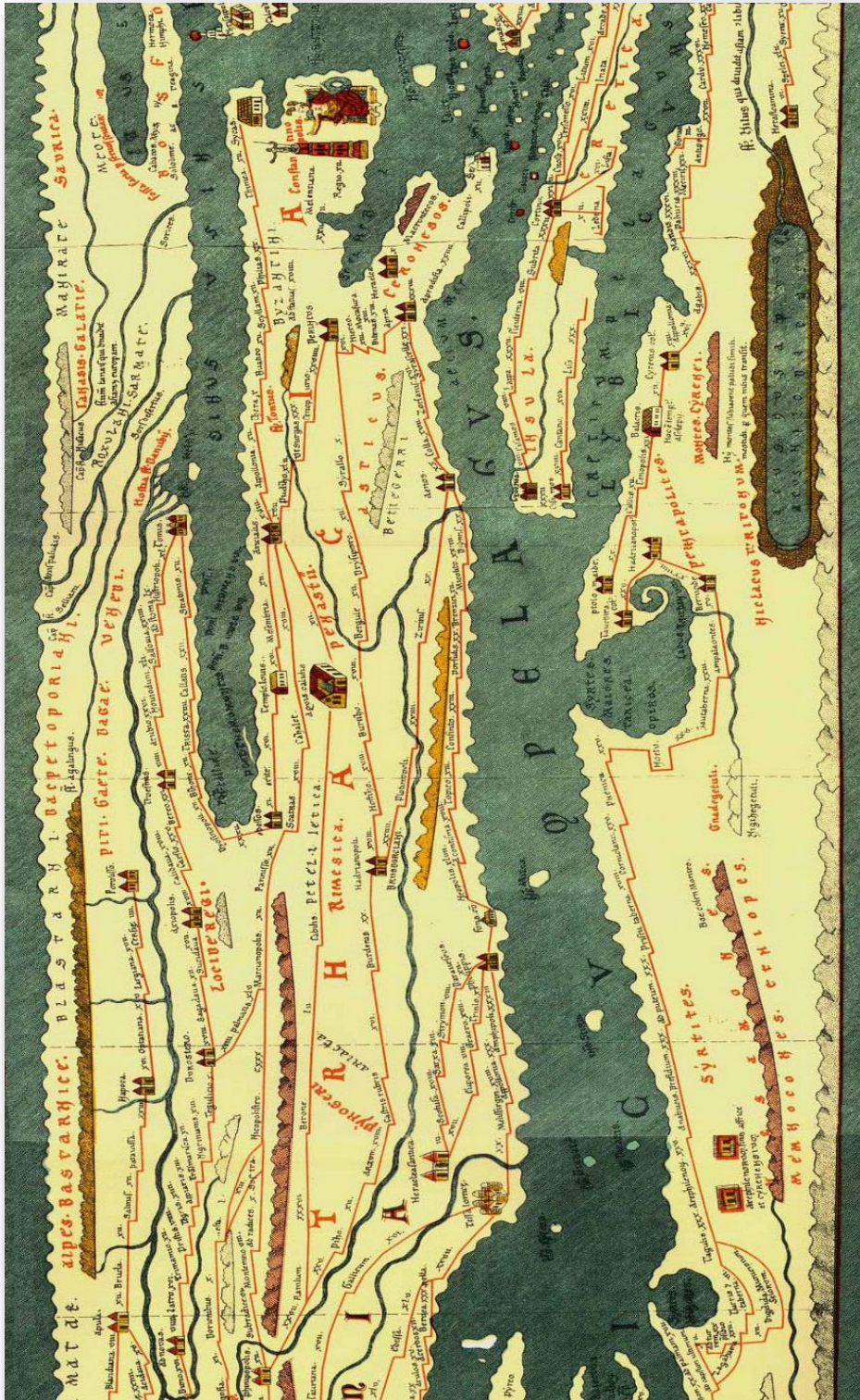


Figure 3: Part of the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, showing the province of Thrace. Image obtained from www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost03/Tabula/tab_intr.html (accessed 22/1/2016).

The *Itinerarium provinciarum Antonini Augusti*, or simply *Itinerarium Antonini*, is of unknown authorship, and is thought to have been composed from information dating to the reigns of both Julius

Caesar and Augustus.⁵¹ It was compiled sometime in the late third century, possibly during the reign of Diocletian, whilst the first print copy of the itinerary dates to 1512.⁵² Unlike the *Tabula Peutingeriana* it has no graphical element, and instead consists of lists of names and distances along the main highways of the Roman Empire.

The third of the *itineraria* is the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, which records the journey of an anonymous pilgrim to Jerusalem in 333 AD.⁵³ It consists of names of stations along the route, along with distances between them, interspersed with a few occasional notes of the historic significance of regions encountered. The first entry in the itinerary is for the city of Bordeaux, from which it draws its name. The *Itinerarium Burdigalense* is most likely the latest of the three surviving *itineraria*, especially if the *Tabula Peutingeriana* is based upon an earlier copy. This explains why the information contained in the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* can sometimes contradict that found in the earlier itineraries, as the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* lists stations that probably had not yet been constructed when the earlier itineraries were compiled.

A fourth source also exists, in the shape of the *Ravenna Cosmography*. This work, compiled in the late seventh century, lists the names of towns, countries and rivers throughout the known world, and is derived from older Roman sources.⁵⁴ The *Cosmography* has proven an invaluable source in recreating parts of road networks of the Roman Empire, in particular in Roman Britain, but in respect to the Balkan provinces, and the route of the *Via Militaris*, it is less useful a source than the three previously described *itineraria*.

Of the three, the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* contains by far the most detail. The *Tabula Peutingeriana* and the *Itinerarium Antonini* list all of the major stations *en route* where a party could potentially rest after a day's journey. The *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, however, lists all of the smaller stages along each day's journey where mounts could be changed. That is, it lists the smaller *mutationes* as well as the larger *mansiones*.⁵⁵ By way of example, along the *Via Militaris* between Belgrade and Constantinople, the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* lists 64 separate locations; 35 *mutationes*, 22 *mansiones*, and 7 *civitates*. In comparison the *Tabula Peutingeriana* lists 32 locations along the same route, whilst the *Itinerarium Antonini* lists 31.

⁵¹ *Itinerarium provinciarum Antonini Augusti*, O. Cuntz ed., *Itineraria Romana, Vol. 1, Itineraria Antonini Augusti et Burdigalense* (Leipzig 1929).

⁵² T. Codrington, *Roman Roads in Britain* (London, 1903), p. 16.

⁵³ *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, trans. A. Stewart, *Itinerary from Bordeaux to Jerusalem, 'the Bordeaux pilgrim'* (London, 1887).

⁵⁴ A. Richmond & O. G. S. Crawford, 'The British section of the Ravenna Cosmography', *Archaeologia*, 93 (1949).

⁵⁵ The different types of station employed by the Romans will be discussed further below in Chapter 6.

Interpretations of classical *itineraria*, in particular the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, have historically proven highly controversial. Attempting to correlate the distances between the stations of the *itineraria* with modern recorded distances sometimes works, but almost as often it does not.⁵⁶ One reason for this is that the locations of many of the named stations are not known. This is then compounded by the fact that Roman roads often did not run as straight as they are usually represented as doing. What the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, as well as many modern maps of the Roman road network, represent as straight lines connecting each location, can actually be far different on the ground. As a consequence, the method of drawing straight lines from point to point, and comparing these distances to those noted in the *itineraria*, can lead to flawed conclusions being reached.

To confuse matters even more, it is not clear what the distances in the *itineraria* are exactly meant to represent. The assumption that they indicate the distance, in Roman miles, between each named 'node' on the map may be an incorrect one. Instead the distances may have been measured between specific milestones or important intersections where a traveller could potentially make a wrong turn, in which case the road network itself formed the geographical reference system by which travellers found their way, not the cities or stations along its length.⁵⁷ Nor is it to be assumed that the *itineraria* depict the route of a single road between two points. It may instead be describing a series of stretches of a number of different roads all connecting the same point, therefore it may not necessarily represent the route of a single road between two locations, yet neither might it represent all possible roads available either.⁵⁸ Some of the distance shown on the routes may even correspond to distances covered by water, when this was more convenient than travel by land.⁵⁹

The itineraries also cannot be treated as infallible. As Ramsay argues in his work on the historical geography of Asia Minor, it is possible that they contain false information, such as the misnaming of stations, which could either be attributable to errors made in the initial compilations, or by later copyists.⁶⁰ The names of stations changed constantly as well, and given that few stations along the *Via Militaris* have been definitively located, it is often difficult to tell whether different names across the three itineraries represent a simple change of name, or indicate completely different stations.

The use of these itineraries within historical geography is therefore something of a necessary evil, in that so few other sources pertaining to the Roman road network are available. To use them, and the

⁵⁶ This is the opinion of French after reviewing the Roman roads of Asia Minor, D. H. French, 'A study of Roman roads in Anatolia: principles and methods', *Anatolian Studies*, 24 (1974), p. 148.

⁵⁷ Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, p. 31.

⁵⁸ Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, p. 31.

⁵⁹ Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, p. 31.

⁶⁰ W. Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor* (London, 1890), p. 48. For an example see the confusion which surrounds the locations of the stations Bagaraca and Sarto further below in Chapter 11.4.

distances they provide, as a guide to locating the relative positions of roads and stations along them is fraught with difficulties. If, however, they are used in close corroboration with analysis of the geographical environment and archaeological remains, they can prove invaluable aids. That is, itineraries should not be treated as authorities themselves, but rather as support for more conclusive evidence.

Interpretations of the *itineraria* are the key focus of a number of contemporary works that have attempted to reconstruct the Roman road network in its entirety. The German cartographer Konrad Miller provided perhaps the definitive treatment of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* in his work, *Itineraria Romana: Römische Reisewege an der Hand der Tabula Peutingeriana*.⁶¹ Miller's ambitious work included a complete depiction of the entire Roman network, based on ancient sources as well as contemporary field research, which was compiled together in over three hundred hand drawn sketches.

This theme was returned to in the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, a similarly monumental compilation of 102 colour topographic maps that cover the span of the ancient world, from the Atlantic as far as the fringes of western China.⁶² The aim of the project was to be able to represent the entire breadth of the ancient world, utilising the modern contributions of both archaeological and epigraphical research, in a single volume, while its overall purpose is to present a viable means for classicists to appreciate the geographical context of the ancient world. Owing to the sheer scale of the project, however, it did not aim to be exhaustive in its depiction of the ancient landscape.

A project with a similar aim is the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* (henceforth *TIB*) series. Launched by the Austrian Byzantinist Herbert Hunger in 1966 and co-ordinated by the Austrian Academy of Sciences, this ongoing project seeks to provide a complete topographical depiction of the land area encompassed by the medieval Byzantine Empire, which combines aspects of history, archaeology, bibliography and field research and surveys.⁶³ As a consequence it contains a massive amount of material, covering the entire scope of Byzantine history. However its depiction of the road network of the Byzantine Empire has, in particular, attracted criticism. The *TIB* series occasionally makes no recognisable distinction between the road network of the Roman and Byzantine Empires, and this

⁶¹ K. Miller, *Itineraria romana: Römische Reisewege an der Hand der Tabula Peutingeriana* (Rome, 1964), for a critique of Miller's methodology, see Talbert, *Rome's World*, p. 68-71.

⁶² R. J. A. Talbert ed., *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* (Princeton, 2000).

⁶³ M. Popović, 'Mapping Byzantium; the project "Macedonia, Northern Part" in the series *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* (TIB) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences', in K. Kriz et al eds., *Mapping Different Geographies* (Vienna, 2010), p. 222.

conflation of the two at times does not match up with archaeological evidence.⁶⁴ As Popović notes, the work relies very heavily on the publication of archaeological reports of monuments.⁶⁵ In some regions, and as will be seen in particular along the route of the *Via Militaris*, the level of archaeological research is very low, which creates some uncertainty in the depictions provided by the *TIB* series.

These compendiums of historical geography have also influenced a number of online cartographic projects primarily aimed at depicting the geography of the classical world. These include the Pleiades project,⁶⁶ the Digital Atlas of Roman and Medieval Civilizations,⁶⁷ the Ancient World Mapping Centre,⁶⁸ OmnesViae,⁶⁹ and the Pelagios Project.⁷⁰ The benefit of online based cartographies is that the historical map can also function as an interface or index to additional information; geographic locations on the map can be linked to a magnification of the particular location, to the original or the translated text that mentions the site, to settlement plans, photographs, or other contemporary maps (see Figures 4 & 5).⁷¹ It is hoped that this burgeoning field will, in the near future, both accommodate and spur cross disciplinary dialogue between geographers, classicists and archaeologists.⁷²

⁶⁴ D. H. French, 'A Road problem: Roman or Byzantine?', *Istanbuler Mitteilungen*, 43 (1993), p. 445.

⁶⁵ Popović, 'Mapping Byzantium; the project "Macedonia, Northern Part"', p. 222

⁶⁶ <http://pleiades.stoa.org/home>

⁶⁷ <http://darmc.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k40248&pageid=icb.page188865>

⁶⁸ <http://awmc.unc.edu/wordpress/about/>

⁶⁹ <http://omnesviae.org/>

⁷⁰ <http://pelagios-project.blogspot.com.au/>

⁷¹ D. Drakoulis, 'The study of late antique cartography through web based sources' *e-Perimtron*, 2, no. 3 (2007), p. 161.

⁷² T. Elliott & S. Gillies, 'Digital Geography and Classics', *Changing the Center of Gravity: Transforming Classical Studies Through Cyberinfrastructure*, 3, no.1 (2009).

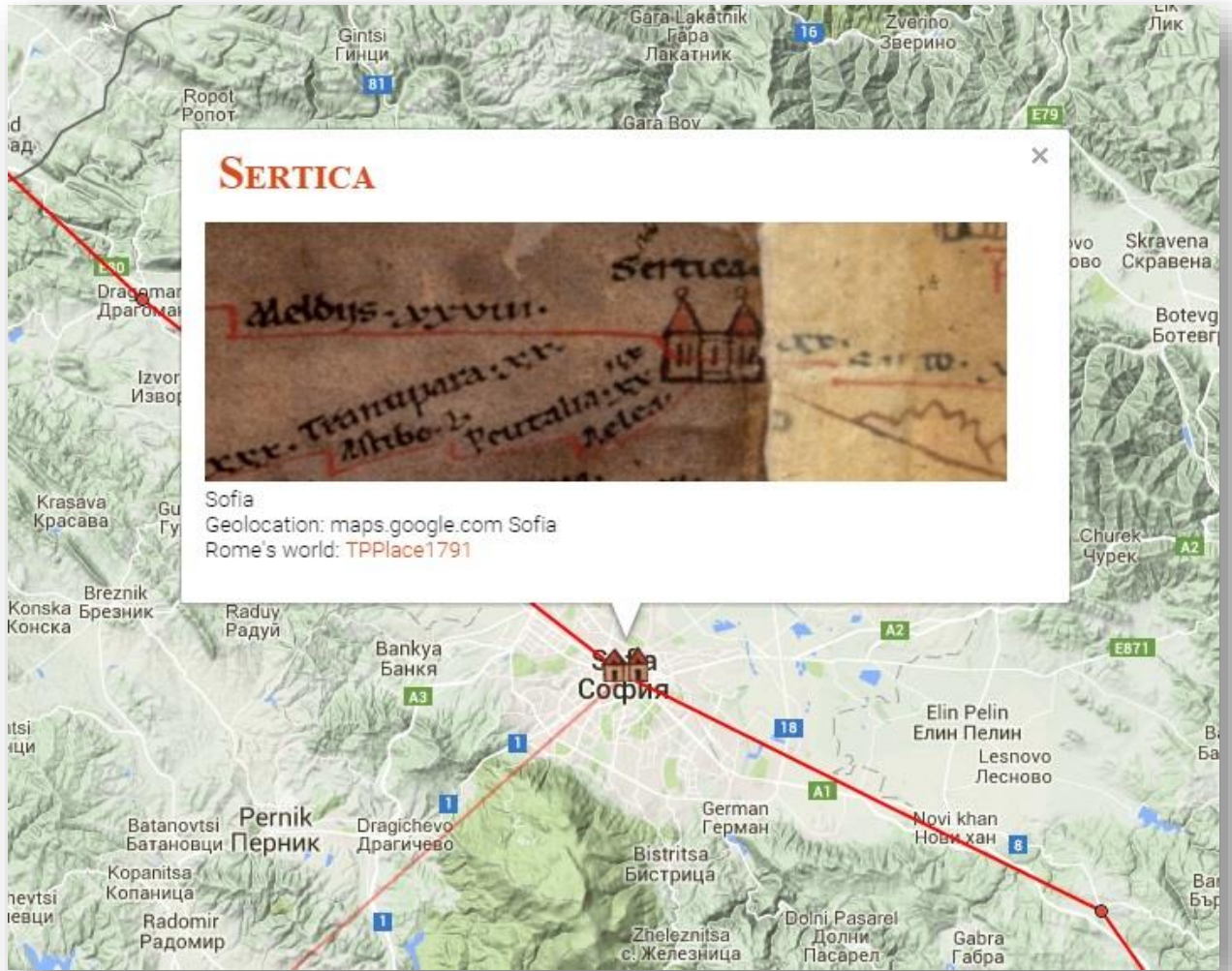


Figure 4: For example, OmnesViae attempts to drape the routes of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* over a modern topographical map, with each location containing a link to the original text. Map captured from <http://omnesviae.org/>

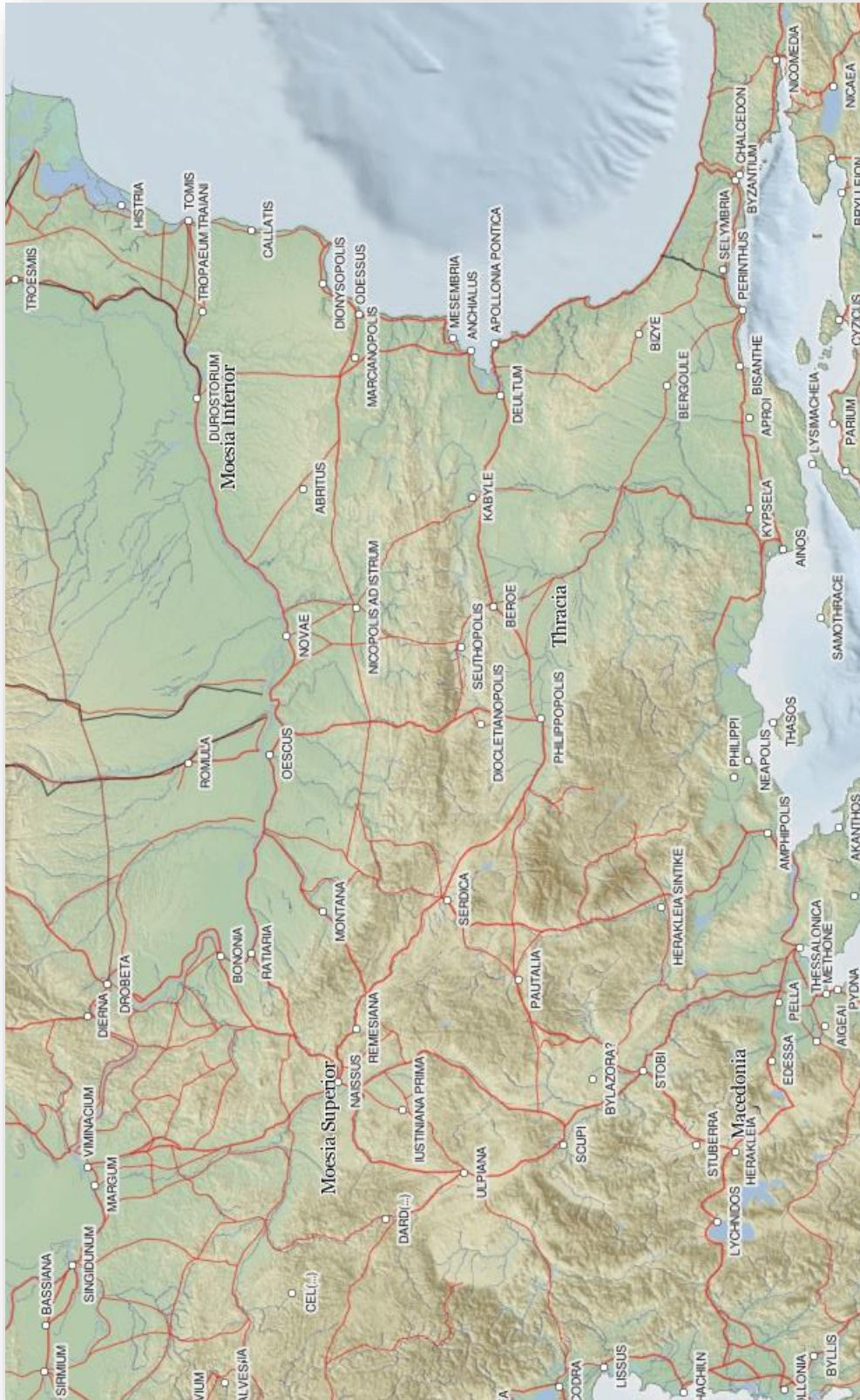


Figure 5: An overview of the Roman road network of the Balkan Peninsula. Map captured from <http://pleiades.stoa.org/>

Historical atlases are an invaluable aid to both scholars and students alike in terms of providing a comprehensive overview of the geographical context of the ancient and medieval worlds. Yet a few caveats must also be considered. As Baker notes, over time historical atlases themselves become sources, and the material selected for inclusion within them reflects the ideologies of the people who produced them, and of the periods in which they were produced.⁷³ Modern historical atlases which simply show the route of the *Via Militaris* as a linear line seemingly passing effortlessly through a largely empty expanse may in part reflect contemporary perspectives on geographical space, where modern transportation has shrunk frontiers and reduced travel to a largely mundane and frictionless exercise.

Furthermore, historical atlases can only ever be as accurate in their depiction of the landscape as the historical record allows them to be, and in many regions this is extremely patchy. Even the location of road stations, a fundamental requirement for tracing the Roman road network, are frequently a source of contention. Moreover, owing to issues of scale, the routes of roads so depicted can often only be taken as a general approximation of where the classical road surface may have been located. The 1:1,000,000 scale maps used by the *Barrington Atlas* and the *Tabula Imperii Romani*, and 1:800,000 scale maps by the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, provide an inadequate representation of topographic detail in particular. As a consequence of their universal approach and the need to present information at a practical scale, these atlases typically fail to provide accurate information of the route of roads at a local level.

This is frequently not an acceptable compromise, as routes are specific to the configuration of micro-regions; Roman roads were universally straight but locally variable in accordance with geographic and social requirements, and furthermore these routes changed over time as the environment, and the requirements of those who used them, likewise changed.⁷⁴ The assumption that routes can be mapped by linking archaeological sites with straight lines is often a misleading one. Yes, Roman roads were typically as straight as they possibly could be, but this was not always the case, nor were they as immune to the influence of local geography as these atlases sometimes suggest, particularly along river valleys or through mountain passes. Occasionally those roads that are depicted are extremely abstractly drawn, and at a local level run through or over geographical obstacles as if they were not even there, and are therefore almost completely useless in terms of ascertaining the exact position of the road at any one point (Figure 6).

⁷³ Baker, *Geography and History: bridging the divide*, p. 198.

⁷⁴ Hordell & Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, p. 128.

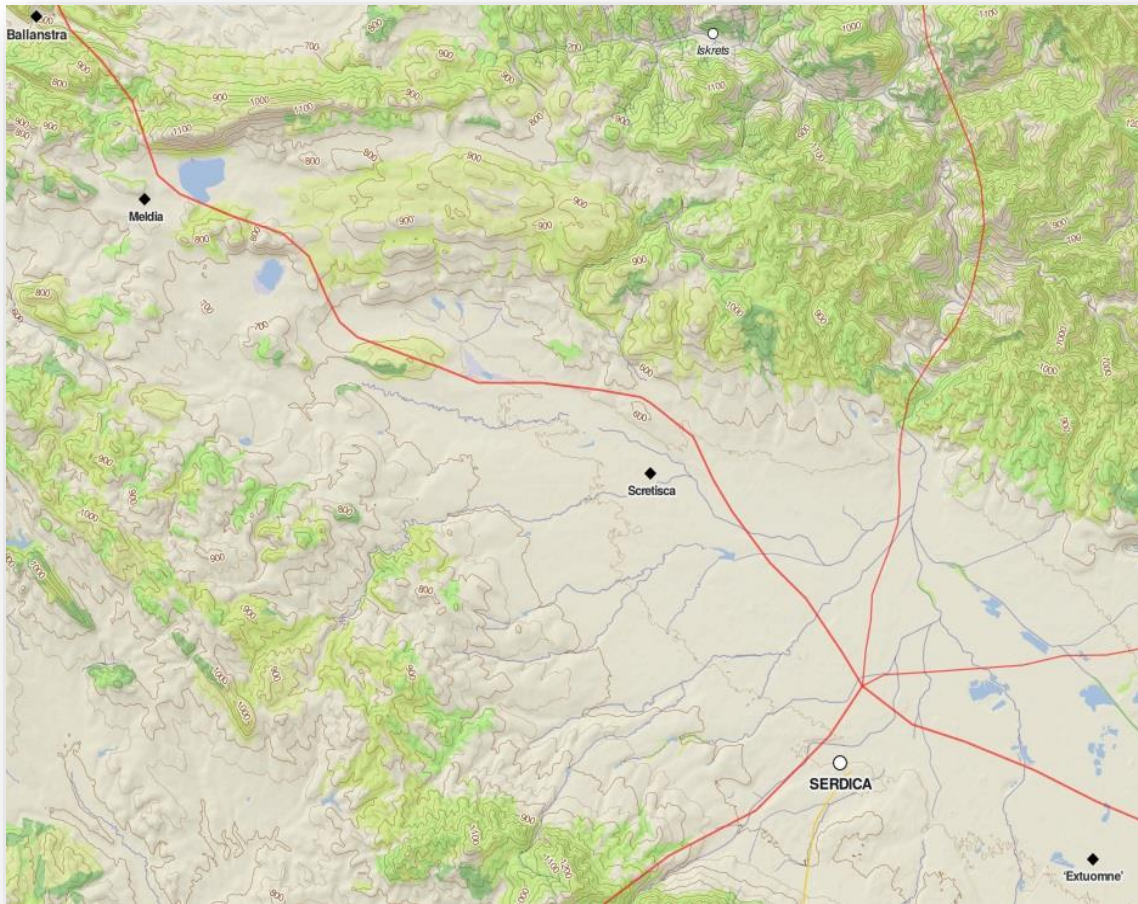


Figure 6: For instance, this depiction of the *Via Militaris* as it approached Serdica, captured from <http://pleiades.stoa.org/>, is highly erratic, showing it crossing mountains and running through swamps, and otherwise completely fails to match surviving archaeological remains.

That the picture of road networks provided by historical atlases is also necessarily static creates complications when these depictions of ancient landscapes are extrapolated into a medieval setting. These atlases give no indication as to the quality of roads over time, and it is possible to interpret the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, for instance, in such a manner as to conclude that the roads of the late sixth century were as navigable as those of the second century, and in a number of instances this can be shown to have simply not been the case.⁷⁵ As such, the depictions represented within these atlases ought to be treated only as a general guide to the routes taken by medieval and ancient roads, and we can learn little from them of the actual quality of the roads they portray.

This is not to suggest that these sorts of sources are redundant in regards to the Middle Ages, far from it, but they do need to be treated with a certain degree of caution whenever attempting to trace the

⁷⁵ For an example see the 'Track of Trajan' below in Chapter 7.

route of Roman roads, and it is likewise dangerous to assume that the medieval road network was an exact mirror of the Roman. Such resources are not attempting to provide a complete picture of the medieval or ancient worlds at a local scale, as this is often impossible owing to the scarcity of reliable data. As opposed to pursuing a dedicated 'scientific' approach, the primary goal is to instead represent what information is currently available in a manner that is readily accessible, and can furthermore be improved upon in the future as more material is uncovered. In this respect these web-based gazetteers, as well as more traditional historical atlases, play an important role in combining history and geography as fields of enquiry, and despite their limitations enable greater co-operation between historians and geographers.⁷⁶

One alternative approach to determining the likely routes of historical road networks at a local level is through the application of predictive modelling. There are a number of different modelling techniques that can be utilised, with perhaps the most common being that of least-cost analysis, which ranks probable routes based on accumulated cost, with costs usually reflecting time and gradients, i.e. which route was the shortest and required the lowest expense of energy.⁷⁷ Popović has demonstrated how existing archaeological and literary sources, when further informed through the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) can lead to a more nuanced understanding of historical transport routes. Such an approach is dependent on a number of factors, not the least being a known starting and finishing point, and a local topography that does not allow for infinite variables of possible routes, such as a flat open plain.⁷⁸

The use of satellite imaging tools vastly enhances the range of what can be achieved through landscape analysis, but itself contains inherent limitations. Such approaches can prove surprisingly fruitful, especially where the routes of modern infrastructure networks can be shown to mirror those of antiquity through the location of associated historical landmarks. However at other times it is overly reliant on the assumption that the landscape of the medieval world can be identified within the modern. This can lead to dangerous geographical assumptions being drawn, particularly owing to large changes that have occurred in the modern environment owing to such processes as deforestation, erosion, and the damming of major river systems.

The application of such tools is therefore still being refined through experience gained by their practical use. As GPS data collection, via such techniques as airborne and remote sensing satellite

⁷⁶ Baker, *Geography and History: bridging the divide*, p. 205.

⁷⁷ On alternate approaches see G. Bellavia, 'Predicting communication routes', in J. Haldon ed., *General Issues in the Study of Medieval Logistics: sources, problems and methodologies* (Boston, 2006).

⁷⁸ M. Popović & J. Jubanski, 'On the function of "least-cost path" calculations within the project *Tabula Imperii Byzantini (TIB)* of the Austrian Academy of Sciences: a case study on the route Melnik-Zlatolist (Bulgaria)', *Anzeiger der philosophisch-historischen Klasse der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaftern*, 145 (2010).

imagery, becomes both even more refined (in terms of resolution) and cost effective, the possibilities available to historians engaged in landscape analysis are increasing exponentially.⁷⁹

3.3: Literary Sources

Amongst the earliest written sources that deal with the Balkan Peninsula are Ptolemy's *Geographia*, which outlines many of the main cities the *Via Militaris* would later come to connect,⁸⁰ and Herodotus' description of the Thracian tribes and the campaign of Darius to subdue the Scythians.⁸¹ From these descriptions it appears likely that the route that would come to be followed by the *Via Militaris* was already well known in antiquity. Indeed it is notable that Ptolemy mentions not only the large cities the future route would one day come to encompass, but also some of the smaller towns such as Arzus and Druzipara.⁸² Amongst Roman authors Ammianus Marcellinus offers detailed descriptions of the geography of ancient Thrace.⁸³ Although not directly applicable to the *Via Militaris*, the journeys of Theophanes in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, thought to have occurred in either 322 or 323, provide useful insights into how the road network operated in this region, and in particular the Roman post system.⁸⁴

Of particular value is the *Codex Theodosianus*, which contains no less than 66 pronouncements on the operation of the *cursus publicus*, the post system operated by the Roman Empire. These texts cover the sorts of abuses that the system was subjected to, covering mistreatment of animals, the proper loading of wagons, provision of fodder, and so on.⁸⁵ Furthermore the *Codex* contains a number of

⁷⁹ For discussion on the potential future applications of airborne and satellite based imagery for historical landscape recreation see S. M. Wilkes, 'Filling the gap: supporting landscape investigation', in J. Haldon ed., *General Issues in the Study of Medieval Logistics: sources, problems and methodologies* (Boston, 2006). For a thorough overview on the current state of research in this field see M. Popović, 'Are the historical geography of the Byzantine Empire and digital humanities a contradiction *per se*?', *Bulgaria Mediaevalis*, 3 (2012), whilst for an introduction to GIS and its employment see P. Burrough & R. A. McDonnell, *Principles of Geographical Information Systems* (Oxford, 1998).

⁸⁰ Claudius Ptolemy, *Geographia*, trans. E. L. Stevenson, *Claudius Ptolemy, The Geography* (Dover, 1991), p. 83-5.

⁸¹ See D. Boteva, 'Re-reading Herodotus on the Persian Campaigns in Thrace', in R. Rollinger *et al* eds., *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich, Akten des 3. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema "Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen"*, Innsbruck, 24.-28. November 2008 (Wiesbaden, 2011).

⁸² Claudius Ptolemy, *Geographia*, p. 85.

⁸³ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus Vol. 1-3* (Cambridge, 1948-52).

⁸⁴ Theophanes, *The Journey of Theophanes; travel, business and daily life in the Roman east*, trans. J. Matthews (Boston, 2006).

⁸⁵ *Codex Theodosianus*, trans. C. Pharr, *The Theodosian code and novels and the Sirmondian constitutions: a translation with commentary, glossary and bibliography* (New York, 1969).

declarations relating to the responsibility of road construction and repair. From these it can be deduced that in the empire of the fourth century it was the duty of the provincial prefects and landowners to maintain local road networks, with the necessary work the responsibility of local citizens. A pronouncement to the Praetorian Prefect, Asclepiodotus, states that, ‘no class of man, by merit of any high rank or veneration, shall be exempt from the construction and repair of roads and bridges.’⁸⁶ The *Novellae* of Justinian indicates that in the sixth century the state continued to apply the same approach towards road construction and maintenance in the provinces.⁸⁷

Detailed information of the *Via Militaris*’ route and surface can sometimes be gleaned from Byzantine hagiographies, in particular of St Alexander of Rome, which makes mention of several stations along the route in the late third century, and that of Blaise of Amorion in the late ninth.⁸⁸ Beginning in the eleventh century descriptions of the route from the perspective of pilgrims who were journeying to the Holy Land, such as the great German Pilgrimage of 1064-5⁸⁹ or Henry the Lion’s pilgrimage in 1172, become available.⁹⁰ Even then, though, we do not possess detailed guidebooks for the journey, such as existed for those who made the pilgrimage to Santiago in Spain, which is surprising considering the volume of pilgrim traffic that made use of this route in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁹¹

Another important source, particularly for the existence of settlements and roadside stations along the route, and the military units attached to them, is the *Notitia Dignitatum*, which lists several thousand offices throughout the entirety of the Eastern and Western Imperial administrative organisations.⁹² It is thought to have been compiled in either the late fourth or early fifth centuries, and modern compilations are derived from a sixteenth century source. The Balkans, in particular, are comprehensively covered and it therefore provides an invaluable overview of the military administration of the region as it existed under Roman rule in the fourth century. Usage of this document is, however, problematic, largely as the context for its creation is unclear, and the highly ordered bureaucratic world it depicts may have never actually wholly existed in reality.⁹³

⁸⁶ *Codex Theodosianus*, p. 432.

⁸⁷ See Chapter 7 below.

⁸⁸ For the route taken by Blaise of Amorion see E. Malamut, *Sur la route des saints byzantins* (Paris, 1993), p. 258-60.

⁸⁹ *Annales Altahenses Maiores*, trans. J. Brundage, *The Crusades: a documentary survey*, (Milwaukee, 1962).

⁹⁰ Arnold of Lübeck, *Arnoldi Chronica Slavorum*, ed., J. M. Lappenberg, *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum ex Monumentis Germaniae Historicis recudi fecit* (Hannover, 1868).

⁹¹ K. N. Ciggaar, *Western Travellers to Constantinople: The West and Byzantium, 962-1204: cultural and political relations* (Leiden, 1996), p. 29.

⁹² *Notitia Dignitatum* trans. W. Fairley, *Notitia Dignitatum or Register of Dignitaries*, in *Translations and Reprints from Original Sources of European History* (Philadelphia, 1899).

⁹³ M. Kulikowski, ‘The "Notitia Dignitatum" as a Historical Source’, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 49 (2000), p. 359.

3.4: Taktika

The Byzantine Empire possessed a rich literary tradition of military manuals, or *Taktika*, one that flowered particularly during the tenth and eleventh centuries. These works were highly influenced by the Roman strategist Vegetius, whose *Epitoma Rei Militaris* was widely read throughout the medieval world. The examples of army organisation, training, order of march and camp construction provided by Vegetius were closely followed in Byzantine texts that sought to adapt these examples to the realities of contemporary warfare, in particular to a state that lacked the wealth and manpower of the Roman empire at its height.

A deficiency in manpower resources compared to their enemies on both eastern and western fronts became a defining feature of Byzantine warfare from the seventh century onwards.⁹⁴ This disadvantage can be traced in the military manuals produced during this era, which placed great emphasis on the importance of intelligence, drill, and manoeuvre. The Emperor Maurice defined this adaptation in his *Strategikon*, with its intense focus on the discipline, organisation and armament of Byzantine armies.⁹⁵ Maurice's work was written without literary pretension, and intended as a practical guide for the officer in the field. Indeed, so comprehensive was it in regards to campaign organisation that the tenth century *Taktika* of Leo VI contains little in the way of new thinking on this topic.⁹⁶

A late tenth century treatise on skirmish tactics and guerrilla warfare on the empire's eastern frontiers, known as *De velitatione bellica*, is believed to have possibly been penned by Emperor Nicephorus II Phocas himself.⁹⁷ The work clearly exhibits an intimate familiarity with the practical challenges posed by campaigning against Muslim adversaries. In particular it pays close attention to how the unique geography of the eastern frontier could be used to the advantage of an observant Byzantine commander, especially in regards to the setting of ambushes.

Yet even a distinguished and experienced general of the empire's eastern frontiers, such as Nicephorus II, still regarded a prospective campaign in the Balkans with an enormous degree of trepidation, and this forms the focus of another military manual, known as the *Taktikon Vari* after its

⁹⁴ The number of soldiers that Byzantium could call upon has been the subject of extensive debate. See M. Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025* (Berkeley, 1996), p. 181-193, and J. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204* (London, 1999), p. 99-106.

⁹⁵ Maurice, *Strategikon*, trans. G. T. Dennis, *Maurice's Strategikon: handbook of Byzantine military strategy* (Philadelphia, 1984).

⁹⁶ Maurice, *Strategikon*, p. xiii.

⁹⁷ *De velitatione bellica*, trans. G. T. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington D.C., 1985).

editor Rezső Vári, and dated to the late tenth century.⁹⁸ The authorship of this treatise is unclear, however it has been argued that it was the work of Nicephorus Ouranos, *Domestikos of the West* during the reign of Basil II. Ouranos was an experienced campaigner, and was entrusted with prosecuting the war against the Bulgarians when Basil II was forced to devote his attention to the eastern frontier between 995 and 999.⁹⁹

The work is clearly addressed to the emperor personally, in the form of providing advice regarding any future campaign to be undertaken in the Balkans. It focuses a great deal of attention, for instance, on how mountain passes should be approached, how the order of march should change in such confined areas, and what precautions needed to be taken before pitching camp to ensure it could be defended in event of attack. In this context the text appears very much like the sort of advice an experienced and trusted general, such as Ouranos, could have provided to a relatively young and inexperienced emperor who, moreover, had recently suffered a devastating and humiliating defeat in the exact same conditions. After his defeat at the Gates of Trajan in 987, it was not till 991 that Basil II was able to retake the offensive against the Bulgarians, and, aged only 33, he was arguably still in a position to justifiably receive such advice.¹⁰⁰

3.5: Byzantine Sources

Other than within these military treatises, references to the geography of the Balkans within Byzantine sources are few. This can be largely ascribed to the typically Constantinopolitan orientation of Byzantine literature, where matters pertaining to the provinces were typically given scant regard by Byzantine scholars, or mentioned only in passing.¹⁰¹ We are therefore largely reliant on the works of authors who resided outside of Constantinople itself, such as Theophylact of Ohrid, Michael Choniates, and Eustathius of Thessalonica, for depictions of life outside of the capital. And yet even in these works references to roads in particular are few, if not non-existent. Similarly, whilst regional maps are immensely useful in recreating the route of medieval road networks, aside from notable exceptions

⁹⁸ *Taktikon Vari*, trans. G. T. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington D.C., 1985).

⁹⁹ E. McGeer, 'Tradition and Reality in the *Taktika* of Nikephoros Ouranos', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 45 (1991), p. 129.

¹⁰⁰ G. T. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington D.C., 1985), p. 241.

¹⁰¹ G. Ostrogorsky, 'Byzantine cities in the Early Middle Ages', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 13 (1959), p. 47.

such as the Madaba Mosaic, such maps were rarely produced in Byzantium, and those few world maps which do exist are lacking in sufficient detail with which to reconstruct the medieval Balkans.¹⁰²

The most useful references to the *Via Militaris* within Byzantine works are therefore generally to be found in Theophylact Simocatta's *Historiae*, the *Chronicle* of Theophanes the Confessor, Leo the Deacon's *Historiae* and the *Alexiad* of Anna Comnena. Whilst in all of these works, as well as others of the period, direct references to the actual road are few, they all contain information of cities and locations along its route that, if not drawn from first-hand experience, were most likely drawn from contemporary sources. The *Alexiad*, for instance, refers to the '*highroads*' that were swamped by numerous crusaders travelling to the capital during the passage of the First Crusade, but otherwise detail is generally lacking.¹⁰³

It is curious, however, that even those authors who definitely had made use of the *Via Militaris* at one point, such as Leo the Deacon during Basil II's aborted campaign against Serdica, and Nicetas Choniates whilst governing the city of Philippopolis, make no specific mention of its existence. The most likely reason is because a road was such a mundane subject, these authors felt no compulsion to do so. On the other hand, if the road had proven enormously difficult to traverse, it's much more likely to have warranted comment. One obvious conclusion to draw, therefore, is that the *Via Militaris* was generally in a good state of repair, at least along those sections which these authors travelled, and therefore thoroughly unremarkable.

3.6: Crusader Sources

Instead it is the crusader histories of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries that prove to be the most valuable sources in terms of detailed descriptions of not only the route of the *Via Militaris*, but also of the quality of the road's surface. Until the beginning of the thirteenth century, and the Fourth Crusade, the overland route to the Holy Land was preferred, and the majority of participants of the First Crusade, almost the entirety of the Second, and the largest single contingent of the Third, all made use of the *Via Militaris* on their journey to Constantinople, and hence onwards to the Holy Land.

¹⁰² E. Savage-Smith, 'Maps and Trade', in M. M. Mungo ed., *Byzantine Trade, 4th-12th centuries: the archaeology of local, regional and international Exchange. Papers of the Thirty-eighth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, St John's College, University of Oxford, March 2004* (Oxford, 2009), p. 18.

¹⁰³ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, trans. E. Dawes, *The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena: being the history of the reign of her father, Alexius I, Emperor of the Romans, 1081-1118 A.D.* (London, 1928), p. 249.

Those who participated in the First Crusade took one of either three routes: after crossing the Straits of Otranto between Bari and Dyrrachium taking the *Via Egnatia* to Constantinople, or following the course of the Danube as far as Belgrade and then travelling along the *Via Militaris*. The third and final route was the curious itinerary pursued by Raymond of Toulouse along the Adriatic coast, before finally linking up with the *Via Egnatia* (Figure 7). Godfrey of Bouillon, who took the *Via Militaris*, led a host that numbered amongst the largest of all those that departed to the East, and along with the 'People's Crusade' that preceded it, the expense (and danger) of the crossing at Bari probably influenced the decision to take the landward route.

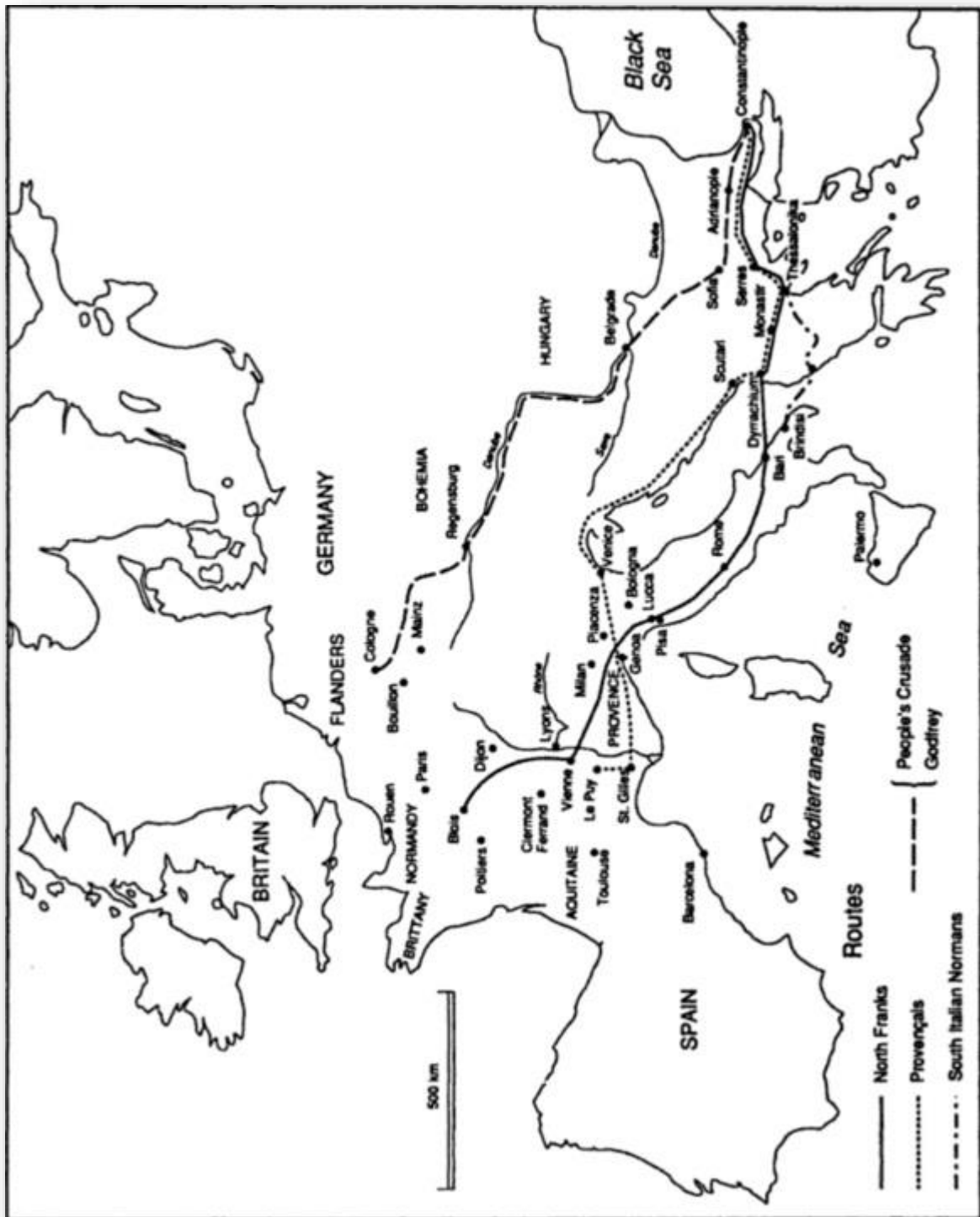


Figure 7: Itineraries of the First Crusade. From J. France, *Victory in the East: a military history of the First Crusade* (New York, 1994), p. 89.

It is interesting that the major participants of the Second Crusade, the hosts led by Louis VII and Conrad II, both opted to take the overland route along the *Via Militaris*. For Conrad this was the logical choice as from Central Germany this was the most direct route to Constantinople. Yet even though Louis was offered free passage across the Straits of Otranto by King Roger II of Sicily, he too preferred to take the overland route.¹⁰⁴ This decision was likely influenced by numerous factors, such as avoiding the need to negotiate the passes of the Alps, and the inherent dangers involved in crossing the Straits, as well, perhaps, by a desire to imitate the journey of Godfrey of Bouillon. Yet likely the single largest reason was, considering that the host was accompanied by large numbers of wagons, the *Via Militaris* represented a faster and easier voyage for the crusaders, avoiding potential delays in transporting baggage across the Straits, and then making the difficult journey across the Pindus Mountains.¹⁰⁵

The largest single contingent of the Third Crusade, led by Frederick Barbarossa, likewise chose to take the overland route to Constantinople, again, no doubt influenced by the large numbers of wagons that accompanied the host. This proved to be the last crusader force that would choose to make the overland journey to the Holy Land, and from this point onwards travel by sea became the norm, a shift that was undoubtedly influenced by advancements in naval technology made in the late twelfth century.¹⁰⁶

The overland route along the *Via Militaris*, therefore, was undoubtedly the preferred means of travelling to Constantinople during the crusading period until advances in naval technology rendered it redundant. Equally notable is that the 'Great German Pilgrimage' of 1064-5, which travelled with a considerable baggage train, also chose this road. The popularity of the *Via Militaris*, particularly in comparison to the *Via Egnatia*, was most likely the consequence of a growing familiarity with the route, and the suitability of the road for conveying large numbers of wheeled vehicles, and the sources that cover these expeditions are therefore uniquely valuable in regards to the condition of the medieval *Via Militaris*.

¹⁰⁴ Odo of Deuil, *De profectioe Ludovici VII in orientem*, trans. V. G. Berry (New York, 1948), p. 11. It is not clear if Roger II was offering to transport Louis VII's host all the way to the Holy Land, or merely across the straits, see J. France, 'Logistics and the Second Crusade', in J. Pryor ed., *Logistics of warfare in the age of the Crusades: proceedings of a workshop held at the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 30 September to 4 October 2002* (Aldershot, 2006), p. 79-80.

¹⁰⁵ A. Murray, 'Roads, bridges and shipping in the passage of crusade armies by overland routes to the Bosphorus 1096-1190', in K. Holzner-Tobisch, T. Kuhnreiter & G. Blaschitz eds., *Die Vielschichtigkeit der Straße: Kontinuität und Wandel in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit* (Vienna, 2012), p. 189.

¹⁰⁶ It is, however, difficult to determine what specific technological advances prompted this transformation. For more on this topic see J. Pryor, *Geography, technology and war: studies in the maritime history of the Mediterranean, 649-1571* (Cambridge, 1988).

The most valuable crusading source of the First Crusade in regards to the *Via Militaris* is the *Historia Hierosolymitanae expeditionis* of Albert of Aachen.¹⁰⁷ Albert did not himself participate in the crusade but his record of it, which was written no earlier than 1102, was drawn from first hand sources. His account is unique in that it provides invaluable detail of the 'People's Crusade' of Peter the Hermit, and the Crusade of 1101. Although Albert of Aachen is scathing in his contempt for the participants of the 'People's Crusade', he provides enough information of their journey that it is possible to recreate their itinerary in some detail. This information has led scholars to conclude that far from the disorganised rabble that Albert depicts, Peter the Hermit's force must have been a highly organised one, as it was able to maintain a more than respectable rate of march of 17.7 miles per day over the duration of the journey to Constantinople.¹⁰⁸

For the Second Crusade the *De profectioe Ludovici VII in Orientem*, written by Odo of Deuil, a monk of the abbey of St Denis, is an extremely useful source. Odo became chaplain to Louis VII of France and accompanied him on his crusade to the Holy Land, from December 1145 till the arrival of what remained of the French army at Antioch in the spring of 1148. Odo was virulently anti-Byzantine in his outlook, and whilst this definitely colours his text from an objective viewpoint, the observations he makes during the journey suggests that his factual reliability was based on solid foundations.¹⁰⁹ Odo's account provides a surprising amount of information on the route to Constantinople, including remarks on the quality of the road surface, the time in days it took to reach each city along its length, and the sorts of wagons that accompanied the force. It is believed that he intended his work to act as advice for future crusaders, and to explain the reasons why this particular crusade had failed.¹¹⁰ This makes his history an invaluable text in regards to the logistics of crusading, and medieval logistics in general.

In relation to the Third Crusade, the anonymous *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris* offers a great deal of information on the *Via Militaris*.¹¹¹ This text is traditionally attributed to a certain Ansbert, although this name was added only to a later thirteenth century copy, with the original text

¹⁰⁷ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, trans. S. B. Edgington, *Historia Ierosolimitana: history of the journey to Jerusalem* (Oxford, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ J. Nesbitt, 'The rate of march of Crusading armies in Europe: A study and computation', *Traditio*, 19 (1963), p. 180. In comparison the supposedly better organized force led by Godfrey managed only 15.5 miles per day.

¹⁰⁹ H. Mayr-Harting, 'Odo of Deuil, the Second Crusade, and the Monastery of Saint-Denis', in M. A. Meyer ed., *The Culture of Christendom: essays in medieval history in commemoration of Denis L.T. Bethell* (London, 1993), p. 227.

¹¹⁰ France, 'Logistics and the Second Crusade', p. 78-9. France, however, argues that Odo was happy to manipulate facts to some extent, as will be readily seen when it comes to computing travel times between locations.

¹¹¹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, trans. G. A. Loud, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa: the history of the expedition of the Emperor Frederick and related texts* (Leeds, 2010).

ascribed only to 'an Austrian cleric who was present at this time'. It is argued that this text must have been completed no later than 1200, and is therefore a composite text that drew on several first-hand sources, with Ansbert possibly being the last contributor to it.¹¹² Certainly the comprehensive description it provides of the crusading expedition of 1189-90, in particular its numerous references to specific details along the crusaders march, such as accounts of disturbances with local populations, must have been that of an eyewitness.

A further contemporary text, a diary, or *memoria*, of a crusader named Tageno, is also incorporated into the *Historia de Expeditione*. Tageno accompanied the crusaders and provided detailed descriptions of Barbarossa's passage across the Balkans and Anatolia, as well as observations on local geography and climate, before his death in Syria in 1190. It is unclear, however, to what extent the compiler of the *Historia de Expeditione* relied upon the diary of Tageno. The original manuscript is lost, and is largely only known through another composite source of the Third Crusade, that compiled by Magnus of Reichersberg.¹¹³ The relationship between the *Historia de Expeditione* and Tageno, therefore, is difficult to determine. Loud argues that whilst the *Historia* copies Tageno's diary verbatim for a period of three and a half weeks preceding the death of Barbarossa (between May 16 to June 9, 1190), stylistic differences between the *Historia* and the text preserved by Magnus of Reichersberg suggest that the compiler of the *Historia* was not overly reliant on Tageno's work, and indeed until the crossing of the Bosphorus these two narratives can be considered as being essentially independent from one another.¹¹⁴

An additional source for the crusade is the *Historia peregrinorum*, which survives only from a thirteenth century manuscript, and is thought to have been based on an early, now lost, version of the *Historia de Expeditione*.¹¹⁵ The text contains numerous alterations to that of the *Historia de Expeditione*, particularly in regards to chronology, but also contains observations that suggests it was derived from an eyewitness account of the crusade, perhaps that of a Swabian monk of the Salem monastery where the manuscript was written.¹¹⁶ The differences in chronology, again, are of particular interest in recreating Barbarossa's itinerary and will be dealt with below.

¹¹² Loud, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa*, p. 2-5

¹¹³ Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, trans. G. A. Loud, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa: the history of the expedition of the Emperor Frederick and related texts* (Leeds, 2010).

¹¹⁴ Loud, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa*, p. 4-6.

¹¹⁵ *Historia peregrinorum*, trans. G. A. Loud, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa; The history of the expedition of the Emperor Frederick and related texts* (Leeds, 2010).

¹¹⁶ Loud, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa*, p. 7-8.

A final source is the *Gesta Federici I. Imperatoris in Expeditione Sacra*.¹¹⁷ This is a brief anonymous history of the crusade of Frederick Barbarossa, compiled shortly after the conclusion of the expedition, and likely before the year 1200. Its relationship with both the *Historia peregrinorum* and the *Historia de Expeditione*, however, is unclear.¹¹⁸

3.7: Early Modern Sources

The *Via Militaris*, and the ruins that marked its route, captured the fascination of numerous late medieval and Early Modern European travellers and modern scholarship is indebted to their observations. Indeed the region attracted so many travellers that only a few of the most notable can be mentioned here. Perhaps the most valuable contribution is that provided by the Italian naturalist, Luigi Marsigli, who, in the early eighteenth century, published a six volume series, the *Danubius Pannonico-mysicus*, which studied both the historical and natural environment of the Balkan Peninsula.¹¹⁹ The second volume of this series contains numerous illustrations of surviving monuments in the area, and provides both a depiction of the ruins of the Gates of Trajan, and the orientation of the *Via Militaris* and the neighbouring fortifications as it navigated the Succi Pass.

Maps of the region produced in this era also provide useful information as to the route of the *Via Militaris*. Of particular value is a map of European Turkey created in 1853 by the German cartographer Heinrich Kiepert.¹²⁰ As well as producing compendious historical atlases, Kiepert conducted numerous trips into the Ottoman Empire during the mid-nineteenth century and provided extremely detailed depictions of the contemporary road network in the Balkans. Maps such as Kiepert's are invaluable for showing the route followed by Ottoman roads, in particular in negotiating the narrow mountain passes along the *Via Militaris* (Figure 8).

¹¹⁷ *Gesta Federici I. Imperatoris in Expeditione Sacra*, trans. G. A. Loud, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa: the history of the expedition of the Emperor Frederick and related texts* (Leeds, 2010).

¹¹⁸ E. Eickhoff, *Friedrich Barbarossa im Orient: Kreuzzug und Tod Friedrichs I* (Tübingen, 1977), p. 191.

¹¹⁹ L. F. Marsigli, *Danubius Pannonico-mysicus: observationibus geographicis, astronomicis, hydrographicis, historicis, physicis, perlustratus et in sex tomos digestus* (Amsterdam, 1726).

¹²⁰ H. Kiepert, *General-Karte von der europäischen Türkei: nach allen vorhandenen Originalkarten und itinerarischen Hilfsmitteln* (Berlin, 1853).

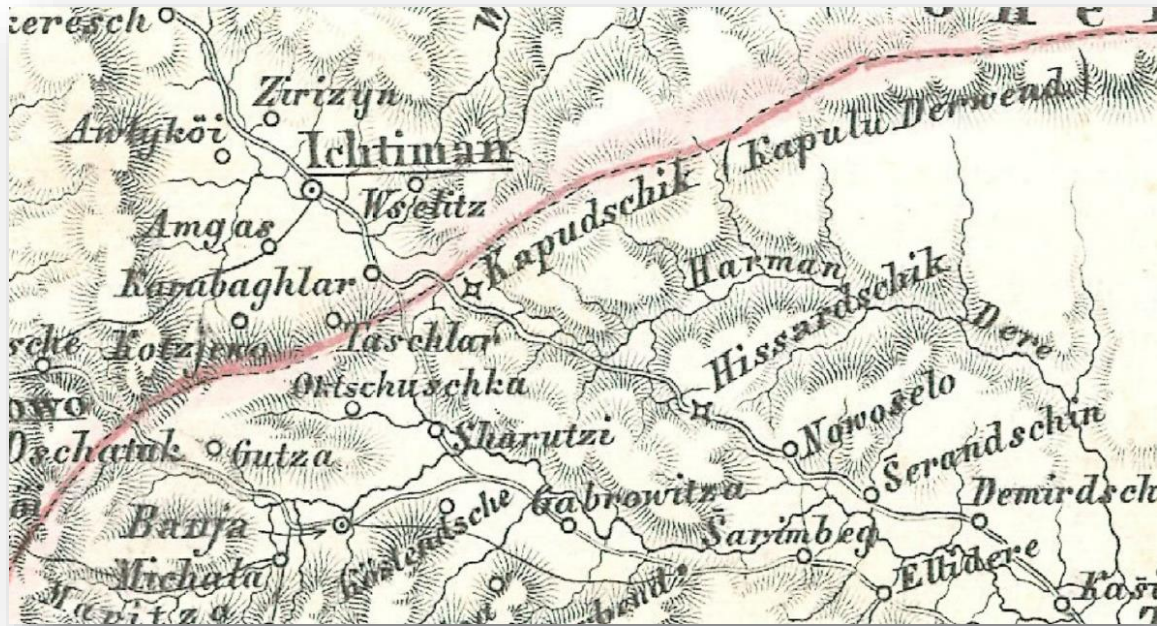


Figure 8: Section of the Ottoman *Via Militaris* as it passes through the Gates of Trajan (Kapulu Dervend). From Kiepert, *General-Karte von der europäischen Türkei: nach allen vorhandenen Originalkarten und itinerarischen Hilfsmitteln*.

In 1716 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu travelled to Constantinople as the wife of the English ambassador to the Ottoman court, Edward Wortley Montagu. Over the course of a large corpus of letters written during her journey she described, often in great detail, the minutiae of life in the Ottoman Empire, and this included observations of the route taken to Constantinople, the quality of the road, the towns and cities that lay along its length, and the dangers encountered.¹²¹ Similar observations are to be found in the correspondence of the mid-sixteenth century Habsburg ambassador to the Ottoman court, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq,¹²² as well as the memoirs of the Bohemian merchant Hans Dernschwam.¹²³ The account of the French Ambassador, Gabriel d'Aramon, who travelled to the Ottoman Court in 1547, contains some interesting observations, as do the letters of the sixteenth century Croatian diplomat, Antun Vrančić.¹²⁴ Even earlier, in 1432, the French pilgrim (and spy)

¹²¹ Lady M. W. Montagu, *The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: edited by her great-grandson, Lord Wharcliffe; with additions and corrections derived from original manuscripts, illustrative notes, and a memoir by W. Moy Thomas* (London, 1887).

¹²² O. Ghiselin de Busbecq, *Legationis Turcicae Epistolae quatuor*, trans. E. S. Forster, *Turkish letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople. 1554-62* (Oxford, 1927).

¹²³ H. Dernschwam, *Ein Fugger-Kaufmann im Osmanischen Reich: Bericht von einer Reise nach Konstantinopel und Kleinasien 1553 – 1555*, ed., H. Hattenhauer & U. Bake (Frankfurt am Main, 2012).

¹²⁴ J. Chesneau, *Le voyage de Monsieur d'Aramon, ambassadeur pour le Roy en Levant: Escript par noble homme Jean Chesneau, publié et annoté par Ch. Schefer* (Paris, 1887), A. Vrančić, *Monumenta Hungaria Historica VI. Scriptores*. ed., L. Szalay (Pest, 1860).

Bertrandon de la Brocquière, returned to Europe via Constantinople over the *Via Militaris*, and provided vivid and detailed descriptions of the regions he traversed, his intention being to both spy out the land and to excite Western lords into pursuing another crusade against the Turks.¹²⁵ As such his work contains careful observations of the fortified towns in each region and the number of men garrisoned in them, and of the road and its condition.

In the nineteenth century the Balkans continued to attract the attention of Western scholars, a process that was only accelerated by the disintegration of Ottoman control over the region, the emergence of new European states, and the development of new rail linkages, in particular the Paris to Istanbul route. However no formal schools of geography developed in the region during this time, and as a consequence most of the academic impetus continued to come from outside of the Balkans proper.¹²⁶ A few examples are the French geographer Guillaume Lejean, who conducted numerous studies, between 1857 and 1870, of the Balkan Peninsula, and extensively mapped the demography of the region,¹²⁷ and the British travellers, and women's rights advocates, Georgina Muir Mackenzie and Paulina Irby, who, in 1877, published in two volumes memoirs describing their experiences of travelling in the Balkans, which provides invaluable insights into rural life.¹²⁸ The geographical handbooks published by the British Admiralty Naval Intelligence Division in the early twentieth century also contain thorough overviews of the climate, geography and transport infrastructure of the Balkan Peninsula.¹²⁹ The US Army Map Service series of topographical maps are likewise a valuable resource for depictions of the transport infrastructure of the pre-modern Balkans.¹³⁰

Another nineteenth century European scholar who was attracted by the research opportunities to be found in the newly opened Balkans, Konstantin Jireček, provided what remains today the defining study of the *Via Militaris*. Jireček, a Czech historian and diplomat who devoted numerous studies to the history of the Balkan Peninsula and the Slavic people, published in 1877 a monograph tracing the route of the road, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe: eine historisch-geographische studie*. Jireček stated that the importance of the road spread beyond just the

¹²⁵ B. de La Brocquière, *Le Voyage d'Outremer*, trans. T. Johnes., *The travels of Bertrandon de la Brocquière, counsellor & first esquire-carver to Philippe le Bon, duke of Burgundy, to Palestine and his return from Jerusalem overland to France, during the years 1432 & 1433* (Wales, 1807).

¹²⁶ F. W. Carter ed., *An Historical Geography of the Balkans* (London, 1977), p. 10.

¹²⁷ G. Lejean, *Ethnographie de la Turquie d'Europe* (Gotha, 1861).

¹²⁸ G. M. Mackenzie & P. Irby, *Travels in the Slavonic provinces of Turkey-in-Europe* (London, 1877).

¹²⁹ For instance see, Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria. Compiled by the Geographical section of the Naval intelligence division, Naval staff, Admiralty* (London, 1920).

¹³⁰ All US Army Maps used in this thesis are sourced from the Army Map Service Topographic Map Series of the University of Texas Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/ams/> (accessed, 22/1/2016).

immediate Balkan Peninsula, claiming that *'for a long time it was the only mainland route between the Orient and Occident'* and that the important role it had played during the invasions of Goth, Huns, Avars and Slavs, as well as the Crusades, not to mention within Byzantine and Ottoman history, gave the route a world-wide historical significance (*weltgeschichtliche Rolle*).¹³¹

Whilst the influence of his ground breaking work is without doubt, it is not without some limitations. Jireček based his interpretation of the route primarily on the use of classical *itineraria* and his own observations of remains of the road's surface and ruins along its length. Unfortunately on occasion Jireček confused the route of the Roman road with that of the newer Ottoman, particularly between Philippopolis and Adrianople, where for a long stretch the Roman road ran to the north of the Maritsa River, yet Jireček continued to trace its course to the south of the river, confusing Thracian and Ottoman remains as those of Roman road stations. Jireček himself admitted in his introduction that he was not able to verify all of the source material himself, and could only provide a general depiction of the road, intending for his work to act as a basis for further research.¹³²

3.8: Contemporary Sources

That Jireček's work remains the pre-eminent study of the route of the *Via Militaris* in itself illustrates how lacking in scope contemporary geographical surveys of the Balkan Peninsula have been. Comprehensive studies of the historical record of the region have largely focused on the remains of the Roman period, such as V. Velkov's, *The cities in Thrace and Dacia in Late Antiquity*,¹³³ M. Biernacka-Lubanska's, *The Roman and early-Byzantine fortifications of lower Moesia and northern Thrace*,¹³⁴ and R. Hoddinott's *Bulgaria in Antiquity*.¹³⁵ The *Tabula Imperii Romani* series has attempted a more ambitious survey of the entire Roman world, however it is still, to date, incomplete, and in addition it could be argued that it suffers from the same weaknesses that hinder the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* series, i.e. an over-reliance on an at times patchy archaeological record.

Beyond archaeological surveys much has been written on the scope and mechanics of medieval trade, the most valuable perhaps being the surveys of medieval trade networks, based upon extensive

¹³¹ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. III.

¹³² Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. IV.

¹³³ V. Velkov, *The cities in Thrace and Dacia in Late Antiquity* (Amsterdam, 1977).

¹³⁴ M. Biernacka-Lubanska, *The Roman and early-Byzantine fortifications of lower Moesia and northern Thrace* (Warsaw, 1982).

¹³⁵ R. Hoddinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity: an archaeological introduction* (London, 1975).

research of primary sources, presented by Robert Lopez.¹³⁶ But, again, comparatively little attention generally has been given in particular to roads and road transport in the Middle Ages, and given that evidence for the existence of medieval roads is so sparse, the road networks of this period are often regarded as a brief, relatively unimportant, interlude between the transport networks of the Roman era and that of the Early Modern period.¹³⁷ Wendel's survey of the transport networks of northern Thrace is particularly useful in this regard in that it is one of the few such works that expands the temporal scope of the study beyond the reign of Justinian.¹³⁸

As a result, the works of Jireček and Konrad Miller remain the best known surveys of the *Via Militaris*. A number of other surveys, including those by the Škorpil brothers, Pavel Detev and Veselin Beševliev, contain a great deal of information about the remains of the road, along with associated stations. Unfortunately, many of these surveys exist only in the Bulgarian language, and the author has been indebted to the work of Dr Mitko Madzharov, whose *Roman Roads in Bulgaria: contribution to the development of Roman road system in the provinces of Moesia and Thrace* provides a comprehensive summary of the current state of research on Roman roads within the territory of modern Bulgaria. In addition to this Madzharov provides critiques of existing interpretations, largely based on his own fieldwork. It could be argued that Madzharov does not support a number of his own conclusions as to the location of stations along the route of the *Via Militaris* with convincing original evidence, but on the whole his methodological framework is sound, and it provides a solid foundation upon which further study of the route of the *Via Militaris* can be based.

Amongst contemporary scholarship there have been few other attempts to trace the route of the *Via Militaris* in its entirety, particularly as it existed in the medieval era. To cite just a few examples, the geography of the region is briefly overviewed in Dmitri Obolensky's *The Byzantine Commonwealth*,¹³⁹ which also provides a lively description of a hypothetical journey along the *Via Militaris*, and is given rather more attention by John Haldon in *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World*.¹⁴⁰ Gavro Škrivanić also provides an, albeit brief, overview of the road and its stations in F. W. Carter's *An Historical Geography of the Balkans*.¹⁴¹ Conversely, perhaps the most comprehensive recent study of the relationship between the Byzantine state and the population of its Balkan provinces, Paul

¹³⁶ R. Lopez, *Medieval trade in the Mediterranean World: illustrative documents, translated with introduction and notes by R. Lopez, and I. Raymond* (New York, 1955).

¹³⁷ I. Whyte, 'Medieval Economy and Society', in M. Pacione ed., *Historical Geography: Progress and Prospect* (London, 1987), p. 110.

¹³⁸ M. Wendel, *Karasura. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des alten Thrakiens: die Verkehrsanbindung in frühbyzantinischer Zeit* (Langenweissbach, 2005).

¹³⁹ D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth; eastern Europe, 500-1453* (London, 1971), p. 35-38.

¹⁴⁰ J. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204* (London, 1999).

¹⁴¹ G. Škrivanić, 'Roman Roads and Settlements in the Balkans', in F. W. Carter ed., *An Historical Geography of the Balkans* (London, 1977), p. 120-122.

Stephenson's *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, never directly outlines the geographic context in which these relationships occurred.¹⁴² Similarly J. V. A. Fine, in *The Early Medieval Balkans*, devotes a mere three pages to the geography of the region, and expresses the hope that the reader will instead familiarise themselves with the most important features of the region, as descriptions of geography are 'usually boring and virtually impossible to remember.'¹⁴³

Admittedly Obolensky and Stephenson in particular are primarily concerned with the cultural and political dimensions, respectively, of interactions between the Byzantine state and its Balkan neighbours, and so the lack of attention given to its geographical setting is understandable. Their methods, however, are emblematic of modern historiographical approaches to the medieval Balkans, where the geographical context is sometimes considered as having a negligible influence on the cultural interactions that shaped the formation of the Balkan Peninsula.¹⁴⁴ This is not to argue that there is anything inherently wrong with these approaches, and on the contrary a focus on the cultural and social dynamics of the region has greatly enhanced our understanding of the development of the medieval Balkans. However, an emphasis on large scale processes at the expense of local realities, of the macro over the micro, can have contentious consequences. One such example can be found in a work that portends to evaluate the total scope of Byzantine strategic policy, Edward Luttwak's *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, which not only eschews the geographical context, but indeed goes as far as to argue that strategic planning need not have any spatial element at all, and posits that the movement of armies through space, 'as in board games', is a marginal element within it.¹⁴⁵

In one sense this might well be true, and Byzantine strategic thought certainly encompassed a far broader field than the movement of soldiers through space alone. If indeed a Byzantine 'operational code' existed, it would have devoted as much attention to questions of diplomacy and espionage as it did to geography and logistics. Yet for the Byzantine Empire, where warfare on both eastern and western frontiers was a constant theme, strategy did not exist on a largely theoretical basis. Enough soldiers would have had the practical experience of campaigning on either front to advise strategic planners, if indeed any existed, that Luttwak's claim that bad roads are good because they offer the advantage of surprise, was not a sound foundation on which to base an operational policy.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² P. Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier: a political study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204* (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁴³ J. V. A. Fine, *The Early Medieval Balkans: a critical survey from the sixth to the late twelfth century* (Ann Arbor, 1983), p. 1.

¹⁴⁴ For more on this argument see also D. Obolensky 'The Balkans in the Ninth Century: barrier or bridge?', in J. D. Howard-Johnston ed., *Byzantium and the West: c. 850 - c. 1200; proceedings of the XVIII Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Oxford 30. March - 1. April 1984* (Amsterdam, 1988).

¹⁴⁵ E. Luttwak, *The grand strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 420.

¹⁴⁶ Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 421.

Notably a few works have attempted to explore the history of the Byzantine Empire in terms of its geographical context, including Philippson's *Das Byzantinische Reich als geographische Erscheinung*,¹⁴⁷ and Demetrukas' *Reisen und Verkehr im Byzantinischen Reich*.¹⁴⁸ However no work has, as of yet, sought to emulate Jireček's approach in both tracing the route of the *Via Militaris* and arguing for its key role in the historical development of the Balkan Peninsula. This is perhaps a consequence of the region's tortured political history throughout much of the twentieth century. For much of this period, and particularly after the Second World War, trans-national travel in the Balkans was difficult, and between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia an impossibility. Consequently, study of the historical remains of the region was largely the preserve of either native historians or those from elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and often tended to focus on high profile sites of perceived national importance, such as Preslav, Pliska and Justiniana Prima.¹⁴⁹

Whilst the study of Byzantine cultural history has recently seen a surge in popularity owing to easier access to the region since the fall of the Soviet Union, Western historians have been curiously slow to embrace the similar potential to be found in historical geography. Modern overviews of the *Via Militaris*, therefore, have tended to exhibit one common weakness; an overreliance on Jireček's analysis of the route, which as has been show above, is flawed both in its approach and the conclusions it draws as to the actual route followed by the road.

¹⁴⁷ A. Philippson, *Das Byzantinische Reich als geographische Erscheinung* (Leiden, 1939).

¹⁴⁸ I. Demetrukas, *Reisen und Verkehr im Byzantinischen Reich vom Anfang des 6. bis zur Mitte des 11. Jahrhunderts* (Athens, 1997).

¹⁴⁹ On the development of historical archaeology in this region in the twentieth century, see Curta, 'Medieval Archaeology in South-Eastern Europe'.

Chapter 4: Historiography

The cause for this absence of contemporary works that seek to emulate Jireček's holistic approach, outside that offered by such surveys as the *TIB*, can be traced to the differing historiographical approaches that largely defined late nineteenth and early twentieth century methodology, and those which dominate the field today. In order to understand the current state of research on a topic such as the *Via Militaris* it is necessary, therefore, to briefly explore the historiographical changes that have occurred within the field of historical geography since Jireček's time.

One of the first prominent challengers to conventional historiographical methodology, and an exponent of a geographically mediated approach that captured the imagination of contemporary scholars, was the late nineteenth century German military historian Hans Delbrück. Delbrück's four volume *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte* outlined this new approach, with his methods perhaps being best demonstrated with his analysis of the Battle of Marathon.¹⁵⁰ Based largely on investigations of the site where the battle took place, and his own experiences with contemporary forces in the field, Delbrück concluded that the numbers provided by Herodotus for the conflict were a factual impossibility.

Herodotus claimed that the invading Persian army was comprised of 2,641,610 fighting men, and at least as many again crew members, servants and camp followers.¹⁵¹ Delbrück estimated that not only was the terrain completely incapable of accommodating such large numbers of soldiers, he also calculated that the Persian army would have formed a marching column over 420 miles long.¹⁵² Based on his evaluation of the battlefield, Delbrück concluded that not only had Herodotus drastically over inflated the Persian's numbers, but given his description of the course of the battle, Delbrück argued that it was the Greeks who actually must have held the numerical advantage.¹⁵³

Delbrück's critique of the account of the battle provided by Herodotus may not have been original, but the methodological manner in which he supported his arguments formed a systematic framework by which he was able to analyze conflicts ranging from the Persian Wars to the Napoleonic Age.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ H. Delbrück, *History of the Art of War within the framework of political history, Vol 1*, trans. W. J. Renfroe (Westport, 1975).

¹⁵¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. A. De Sélincourt (Edinburgh, 1954), p. 480.

¹⁵² Delbrück, *History of the Art of War within the framework of political history, Vol. 1*, p. 118-120. A more modern perspective on these fanciful numbers opines that five million men would have turned all of Thrace, Macedonia and Greece into a desert, R. Kapuściński, *Travels with Herodotus* (New York, 2008), p. 198.

¹⁵³ Delbrück, *History of the Art of War within the framework of political history, Vol. 1*, p. 72-81.

¹⁵⁴ G. Craig, 'Delbrück: The military historian', in P. Paret ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, 1986), p. 334.

Although some of the conclusions Delbrück derived from this methodology have subsequently attracted criticism, especially his assertion that the development of military science ceased altogether in the Middle Ages, he was able to powerfully demonstrate that the geographical context was not merely ancillary to historical methodology, but existed as an inseparable component within it.

The influence of geography in historical processes subsequently became a key focus of a number of historical surveys during the early twentieth century. William Ramsay, for instance, felt confident enough in the inherent importance of the geographical context to declare that topography is the foundation of history.¹⁵⁵ Henri Pirenne likewise asserted the pre-eminence of geographical interactions in his thesis on the development of Mediterranean civilisation in the early Middle Ages.¹⁵⁶ Perhaps its most famous (or infamous) manifestation, however, was the move towards a more universal history as demonstrated in the works of Arnold Toynbee.

Toynbee determined that the *'intelligible unit of society'* was not the nation state nor mankind as a whole, but rather *'the grouping of humanity that we have called society'*.¹⁵⁷ According to Toynbee a society evolved into a civilisation once it had overcome a specific challenge, which could be manifested in various different forms, such as harsh climate or military confrontation. Much of Toynbee's thesis was devoted to describing these challenges, the civilisations that evolved from them, and using this formulae to interpret the rise and fall of civilisations over time. This was not necessarily an original contribution, in that such arguments had been previously explored by Oswald Spengler and Henri Pirenne. Toynbee's monumental, twelve volume, *A Study of History*, however, was a major commercial success, which helped bring his theories sharply into the public realm.

Even at the time of its release Toynbee's thesis was sharply criticised, not least for his selective use of sources and evidence in what he claimed to be a purely empirical work.¹⁵⁸ Today not only the methodology used by Toynbee to analyse the development of civilisations, but even the hypothesis itself, are seen as highly anachronistic. Although Toynbee's approach of interpreting history in the context of civilisation growth and decay was flawed, it did, however, provide a framework in which historical processes could be contextualised. For instance, Toynbee argued that the deterioration of the Roman road network was not a cause of the decline of the Roman Empire, but rather a consequence, and therefore reflected not so much a deficit of technical skills as a symptom of a

¹⁵⁵ Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor*, p. 51.

¹⁵⁶ H. Pirenne, *Medieval Cities; their origin and the revival of trade*, trans. F. D. Halsey (New Jersey, 1956).

¹⁵⁷ A. Toynbee, *A Study of History, abridgement of volumes I-X*, ed., D. C. Somervell (London, 1946), p. 11.

¹⁵⁸ J. Joll, 'Two Prophets of the Twentieth Century; Spengler and Toynbee', *Review of International Studies*, 11, no. 2 (1985), p. 95. On Toynbee's selective use of evidence see P. Geyl, 'Toynbee's System of Civilizations', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9, no. 1 (1948).

greater malaise affecting Roman society.¹⁵⁹ In this interpretation Toynbee is almost certainly correct, in that rather than acting as a catalyst, the Roman road network declined as a consequence of the economic, social and political factors that undermined the operation of the Roman state.

No historian, however, has done more to promote the cause of the geographical context within historical methodology than Fernand Braudel.¹⁶⁰ His defining opus, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, laid out the framework of his argument that geography was not merely a stage upon which historical dramas were enacted, but that historiography should be seen in terms of a continuous interweaving of history and geography, where the changing ecological environment, and cultural appraisals of natural resources (including both time and space) together contribute to form distinctive landscapes.¹⁶¹ Braudel's thesis argued against inherently positivist approaches, instead debating that only through a holistic conception of the multitudinous different 'geographies' that together constitute the Mediterranean was it possible to understand the distinctive cultural landscape of the region. Braudel included in this interpretation not only the Mediterranean basin itself and the cities along its edges, but also the frequently overlooked forests and mountains that ran down to its shore, which he believed played a vital role in the formation of the whole.¹⁶²

In this Braudel was largely following in the footsteps of his mentor, Lucien Febvre. Febvre argued that human activity was at all times constrained by the bounds of the environment it inhabited, and that humans could never truly be free of its grip.¹⁶³ Yet Febvre refused to allow his conception of human activity to be inhibited by the limitations of geographical determinism, rather arguing that the true and only geographical problem is that of the utilisation of possibilities.¹⁶⁴

Both Febvre and Braudel argued that the 'landscape' must be considered in terms of both its human and geographical parameters. They were strongly opposed to the specialisation of discourses in which functions of either the human or geographic equation were compartmentalised and considered in isolation from the whole. Integral to this approach was the theory of the *longue durée*, that history ought to be considered in terms of long term structural change rather than more immediate casual factors, an approach Braudel defined as the '*sin of eventism*'.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁹ Toynbee, *A Study of History, abridgement of volumes I-X*, p. 256.

¹⁶⁰ For a more comprehensive outline of Braudel, his influences and his contemporaries, see Baker, *Geography and History*, p. 16-24.

¹⁶¹ A. Baker, 'Reflections on the relations of historical geography and Annales school of history', in A. Baker ed., *Explorations in Historical Geography: interpretative essays* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 6.

¹⁶² Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, p. 29-30.

¹⁶³ L. Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction to History*, trans. E. F. Mountford and J. H. Paxton (London, 1932), p. 315.

¹⁶⁴ Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction to History*, p. 349.

¹⁶⁵ A. Baker, 'Reflections on the relations of historical geography and Annales school of history', p. 9.

By reference to the *longue durée*, Braudel had in mind the quasi-immobile geographical, climactic, and other physical conditions, and the limits on productivity, that both supported and provided obstacles to social development over very long periods of time.¹⁶⁶ Braudel did not reject the utility of studying short term individual events. Instead he insisted that in comparison to the slower rhythmic histories that constituted the *longue durée*, they were like ‘waves that are raised on the seas by their powerful movements. A history of brief, rapid, nervous oscillations.’¹⁶⁷

At the heart of the theory of the *longue durée* lay the recognition of structures that defined the existence and development of relationships over time.¹⁶⁸ In this respect the geographical constraints of human existence, as defined by Febvre, formed one such structure within which human civilisation was required to conform. Braudel himself recognised the difficulties that the acceptance of such inherent structures would prove, as he noted that, ‘for good or ill’, the word dominated the problems of *longue durée*.¹⁶⁹

The structuralism of Braudel and his contemporaries, as Braudel himself anticipated, has not been universally accepted. Instead of over-arching ‘world histories’, the trend, highly influenced by both Marxist writings and the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, has instead been towards the local, of studying the interactions of people and space at the micro level.¹⁷⁰ Today the field is largely influenced by what has been described as the ‘Cultural Turn’. In this respect culture is seen as the lens through which the world is approached and defines how human agents find their own place within it.¹⁷¹

Contemporary academic discourse, therefore, is more focused on the worlds of relatively small groups over confined periods of time, in which the dull rhythms of the *longue durée* command relatively little attention.¹⁷² Studies of micro-regions, therefore, fail to provide due recognition of the importance of the *Via Militaris* within the wider Balkans as a whole, while in more universal histories the road tends to often fall between the cracks, or is outshone by the far more famous *Via Egnatia*. In a study that proposes to re-evaluate the medieval Balkans in respect to its underlying geographical interactions it is necessary to recast this question in terms of the maxims of Braudel and Febvre, where the geographical context itself provides a structure within which historical processes may be evaluated.

¹⁶⁶ F. Holmes, ‘The *longue durée* in the History of Science’, *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 25, no. 4 (2003), p. 463.

¹⁶⁷ Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁸ F. Braudel, *On History*, trans. S. Matthews (Chicago, 1982), p. 31.

¹⁶⁹ Braudel, *On History*, p. 31.

¹⁷⁰ R. G. Suny, ‘Back and Beyond: Reversing the Cultural Turn?’, *The American Historical Review*, 107, no. 5 (December 2002), p. 1478.

¹⁷¹ Suny, ‘Back and Beyond: Reversing the Cultural Turn?’, p. 1479.

¹⁷² Horden & Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, p. 41.

In light of the scarcity of sources that confronts the modern historian of the region, if the medieval Balkans are to be ever fully understood, then consideration of the landscape itself must play some part in its analysis.

Chapter 5: Methodology

In many ways, Jireček's hope that his study of the *Via Militaris* would raise awareness of what he described as a 'dilapidated and forgotten route' has proven, ultimately, to be a false one.¹⁷³ Rather than open the study of the road up to a wider audience, historians have largely eschewed the possibilities inherent in analysis of the route as a key factor in the development of the medieval Balkans. Whilst the course of the *Via Militaris* has been touched upon by nearly every modern work that seeks to chart the historical development of the Balkan Peninsula since the Roman period, detailed analysis of both the geography of the route and the road itself has been lacking.

The aim of this thesis therefore is to continue in Jireček's footsteps and present a study that is focused primarily upon the geographical and topographical features of the landscape which the route of the *Via Militaris* encompassed, and in doing so provide a much more comprehensive depiction of both the road surface and the route it took in the Middle Ages than has hitherto been available. This will be primarily based upon previous studies in this field, such as by Jireček and the *TIB* series, and will be further complemented by field work, and benefit from contemporary archaeological excavations.

This information will then be used to demonstrate the wider applications of such research, in particular in regards to the field of medieval military history, but also more generally the historical geography of the Balkans. In providing an overall depiction of the road, Jireček's claim that it possessed a 'world-wide historical importance' can be explored. In particular the questions of how important was the route to the establishment and retention of Roman and Byzantine authority over the Balkans, and was the 're-opening' of the route to Western travellers after the Byzantine reconquest of the Balkan Peninsula in the early eleventh century a driving factor in the emergence of the crusading movement, will be discussed.¹⁷⁴

Owing to the paucity of available sources, these questions cannot be answered through an objective view of the route of the medieval road alone, and therefore this thesis seeks to apply the Braudelian concept of the *longue durée* in that the wider history of the road, and the landscape which it traversed, represent elements of quasi-permanent systems, whose functioning over time can be derived from primary sources. The Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires all utilised the road for ultimately

¹⁷³ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 91.

¹⁷⁴ This topic is argued in K. Belke, 'Roads and travel in Macedonia and Thrace in the middle and late Byzantine period', p. 79., also see B. Hamilton & P. McNulty, 'Orientale lumen et magistra latinitas: Greek Influences on Western Monasticism (900-1000)', in B. Hamilton, *Monastic Reform, Catharism and the Crusades, 900-1300* (London, 1979), p. 192-3.

similar purposes. The first was to facilitate the effective and efficient transmission of men, material and information between Constantinople and the Balkan frontiers. Secondly, the road itself represented a statement of imperial authority, a symbol of central control over provinces and peoples far removed physically and culturally from the ruling elite centred at Constantinople. It is no accident that the *Via Militaris*, after crossing the Balkan Peninsula, entered the imperial capital by way of the Golden Gate.¹⁷⁵ Here was imperial authority writ large, and the maintenance and utilisation of this monumental road would have held important symbolic power.

Tracing the medieval route of the road is a difficult task. References to the *Via Militaris* as a functional route most frequently refer to the road as it existed in the Roman Empire. Contemporary descriptions of the road, therefore, typically focus on the period between its construction and the reign of Justinian. This is entirely understandable for, as has been seen, the literary record after this period declines to almost nothing. It is, therefore, unavoidably necessary to use sources from outside of the period in question in order to try and define its medieval identity. Balancing these sources is a difficult task, as the road undeniably underwent a number of changes over the near two millennia of its existence. Indeed it would be more accurate to say that three different roads existed, each with distinct identities but all sharing the contemporary name of *Via Militaris*, these being the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman roads. Differentiating between these roads is largely reliant on the archaeological identification of road debris and accompanying artefacts (such as pottery sherds, coins etc.), and the observations of later travellers.

The Byzantine route of the road is typically assumed to have been identical to that of the Roman *Via Militaris*, and whilst this generally appears to have been the case, there are examples, as will be seen, where the Byzantines may have made use of alternate routes. Since what few sources are available are often extremely vague on which particular road was used, or where the bed of the road lay, the existence of alternate routes remains largely untested. This thesis will, therefore, be able to do little more than point out the locations where such confusion exists.

Typically, based on the observations of Early Modern travellers who noted the remains of the older road as they travelled, the Ottoman road seems to have run largely parallel with the older Roman road. It is likely that this was because the decayed surface of the Roman road often proved too difficult to repair, so instead was used as a ready supply of building material with which to construct a new route. There were sections though, in particular between the cities of Philippopolis and Adrianople,

¹⁷⁵ T. F. Madden, 'Triumph Re-imagined: The Golden Gate and popular memory in Byzantine and Ottoman Constantinople', in R. Gertwagen & E. Jeffreys eds., *Shipping, trade and Crusade in the medieval Mediterranean: studies in honour of John Pryor* (Farnham, 2012).

where the Roman and Ottoman routes differed greatly. On these occasions it becomes difficult to judge which route the medieval road followed; the older Roman or the newer Ottoman. Furthermore, there are a few sections, particularly through extremely narrow river valleys or mountain passes, where the Roman and Ottoman routes appear to have been one and the same, with the Ottoman road lying directly upon the older Roman one. The practice of building directly upon older Roman roads, and utilising material found within embankments to rebuild the surface, is a well attested practice in eighteenth-century England, for instance.¹⁷⁶

Given that this scenario is further confused by modern infrastructure networks, large sections of which were built directly upon existing Ottoman roads, it quickly becomes very difficult to identify, beyond the most general of terms, the route of the Roman road, let alone that of the Byzantine. Only very few segments of the Roman road surface have been uncovered. Far more common are surviving fragments of the Ottoman route, which can be, in places, quite extensive.

Determining the route of the Roman road is largely, therefore, an exercise in landscape analysis. Roman roads typically displayed some very predictable characteristics in terms of their choice of route; they followed watercourses, they tried to follow higher ground wherever possible without over exposing the route to distant observation, and they did not run along the bottom of valleys but rather along their side.¹⁷⁷ This last observation was particularly true in the narrow river valleys of the Balkans, which are highly susceptible to flood after periods of either heavy rainfall or rapid snow melting.¹⁷⁸ Ottoman roads largely conformed to these exact same conditions, which is one reason why the two often exist in parallel. Therefore, when such conditions exist it can largely be assumed that the two routes were almost identical. The one, main, difference between each was that Roman roads sought to pursue a route that avoided marshy and flood prone areas, and minimised the number of bridges required. Ottoman roads, as will be seen, often did not.

In order to demonstrate the importance of the *Via Militaris* in the medieval period use will be made of logistical modelling techniques to establish the manner in which armies, and in particular the German contingent of the Third Crusade, utilised this route in traversing the Balkan Peninsula. The field of logistical modelling is a relatively new one within medieval scholarship, however the benefits of its application have already been demonstrated in parallel fields of historical enquiry.¹⁷⁹ The limits of information pertaining to logistical structures that can be practically obtained from medieval

¹⁷⁶ Codrington, *Roman Roads in Britain*, p. 15.

¹⁷⁷ Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, p. 114-6.

¹⁷⁸ Archibald, *The Odrysian Kingdom of Thrace*, p. 13.

¹⁷⁹ In particular see D. W. Engels, *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian army* (Berkeley, 1978).

sources have, it has been argued, already been reached, and in order to expand our knowledge of how medieval logistical infrastructures operated in practice, including estimations of their carrying capacity, and the social structures that supported them, it is necessary to introduce new quantitative methodologies.¹⁸⁰ Logistical modelling is not in itself necessarily a means to an end, but when used in conjunction with existing sources it can vastly enhance the small glimpses that they provide of medieval life outside of the major cities, and allow the construction of a much broader and more detailed depiction of the medieval landscape.

Logistical modelling as a whole owes a debt of gratitude to the ground-breaking work undertaken by Martin van Creveld, whose *Supplying war: logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* has forced historians to consider the matter of military logistics, particularly those of the pre-Modern era, in a new light.¹⁸¹ Although aspects of Creveld's methodology have since attracted criticism, his underlying argument that until the First World War armies relied largely on foraging to sustain themselves in the field has compelled historians to reconsider the question of medieval logistics, and in particular its influence on decision making within pre-Modern armies.¹⁸²

In constructing the logistical model heavy use will be made of previous work in this field by Haldon,¹⁸³ Bachrach,¹⁸⁴ and Pryor.¹⁸⁵ There is no one 'accepted' method of logistical modelling, and the parameters that govern it (for example daily required supplies for men and animals) are the source of ongoing debate, and in particular there are difficulties associated with comparing such information across different time periods.¹⁸⁶ It is not the intention of this work to argue for one method definitively over the other, and instead the most applicable will be chosen to model the movement of the German contingent of the Third Crusade along the *Via Militaris*. As such, models of the structure of an army on the march will draw upon the computations of Pryor, the carrying capacity and speed of animals on Bachrach, whilst supply consumption will be based upon the equations developed by Haldon.

¹⁸⁰ J. Haldon, 'Why model logistical systems?', in J. Haldon ed., *General Issues in the Study of Medieval Logistics: sources, problems and methodologies* (Boston, 2006), p. 3.

¹⁸¹ M. van Creveld, *Supplying war: logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge, 1977).

¹⁸² For a critique of Creveld's methodology see J. A. Lynn ed., *Feeding Mars: logistics in Western warfare from the Middle Ages to the present* (Boulder, 1993).

¹⁸³ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 281-293.

¹⁸⁴ B. S. Bachrach, 'The Crusader March from Dorylaion to Herakleia, 4 July –ca. 2 September 1097', in R. Gertwagen & E. Jeffreys eds., *Shipping, trade and Crusade in the medieval Mediterranean: studies in honour of John Pryor* (Farnham, 2012).

¹⁸⁵ J. Pryor, 'Introduction: modelling Bohemond's march to Thessalonike', in J. Pryor ed., *Logistics of warfare in the age of the Crusades: proceedings of a workshop held at the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 30 September to 4 October 2002* (Aldershot, 2006).

¹⁸⁶ Haldon, 'Roads and communications in the Byzantine Empire: wagons, horses, and supplies', in J. Pryor ed., *Logistics of warfare in the age of the Crusades*, p. 135.

A comprehensive logistical model of the route of the *Via Militaris*, however, would encompass a large number of variables, including the carrying capacity of the land traversed, the size of population centres, the accessibility of water resources (including access to rivers, stream and springs), and availability of beasts of burden.¹⁸⁷ The mathematical modelling of these variables, along with the utilisation of contemporary GIS technology to form detailed topographical maps, represents the cutting edge of contemporary research in this field. However the current state of research on such subjects in the medieval Balkans is extremely limited, and until such information is compiled it is impossible to complete such an accurate model of the route in question. Instead, the logistical model used will employ parameters of a more modest scope, namely focusing on the road itself: the quality of its surface, its width, and its route. It is hoped that this model would then prove to be a foundation upon which more detailed analysis of the *Via Militaris* could subsequently be applied, or at least engender further debate of its route and condition within the medieval period.

Modelling the passage of forces along the *Via Militaris* can help inform our understanding of the medieval Balkans in a number of ways. Firstly it can help in defining the logistical bounds that governed the movement of armies through this region. For example, it will be possible to use such models to calculate the rate of march which armies of various sizes were able to achieve. Secondly it can be used as a means to evaluate and critique Byzantine strategic planning in this region, in that the effectiveness of blockading passes and denying provisions to an enemy force can only be truly understood if the underlying logistical context can be defined. Thirdly, and finally, by developing a greater understanding of the logistical context that underlay interactions along the *Via Militaris* we are better positioned to answer questions relating to the development of the medieval Balkan Peninsula as a whole. How isolated were the cities along its length, such as Philippopolis, Serdica and Naissus, from Constantinople? How long could it reasonably take an army of a certain size, or a smaller group of travellers, to reach these cities, and during what periods of the year could they safely travel? Answers to such questions would go a long way to determining the relationship between provincial cities and Constantinople, and whether, during the Middle Ages, these cities were intimately connected with it, existed as long distance satellites, or were instead effectively culturally isolated from the imperial capital.

¹⁸⁷ An example of such a study along part of the route of the *Via Militaris* can be found in J. Crow & S. Turner, 'Silivri and the Thracian hinterland of Istanbul: an historic landscape', *Anatolian Studies*, 59 (2009).

Chapter 6: Roman Roads

The construction of major roadways is synonymous with the Roman Empire. Recently absorbed territories were soon crisscrossed with highways connecting the major population centres together with legionary barracks, and, inevitably, with the capital Rome itself. Beyond their practical application, the road networks that the Romans created also served to unify the empire into a more coherent whole; they were part of a recognisable landscape that emphasised a cultural unity across the empire, in contrast to those regions beyond it.¹⁸⁸

The legions themselves played an important role in their construction, and imperial legions and engineers may have been as familiar with bridge and road construction as they were with the erection of their highly ordered marching camps. The primary purpose of these roads, especially those built in newly acquired territories, was to facilitate military organisation: to ease the movement of men and material to wherever it was needed and to enable the exploitation of resources by military and administrative means.¹⁸⁹ Any other benefits, whether to trade or public administration, were initially a secondary concern. Indeed for designated military roads, such as the *Via Militaris*, non-military use was severely curtailed through the use of passports; use of the road was limited to soldiers, military officials with valid warrants, and personnel of the offices of the *procurators* who were responsible for the grain supply for the troops.¹⁹⁰ These restrictions were put in place in order to limit the amount of wear and tear on their surface, although doubtless private use was still made of these roads.

The construction of roads held an important place in Roman history; Strabo attributed the pacification of the Italian peninsula to the construction of roads through the dangerous, bandit infested, mountain passes of the Apennines.¹⁹¹ Given the number, and fame, of the roads of the Roman Empire it is surprising therefore how little is known either of their construction, or their repair. No handbooks of road construction have survived and much of what is known is dependent on the few references to road construction that can be gleaned from the works of authors such as Livius, Diodorus, Tacitus and Strabo. Given how vital the road network was for the efficient function of imperial administration, and

¹⁸⁸ C. Adams & R. Laurence eds., *Travel and Geography in the Roman Empire* (London, 2001), p. 172, see also Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, p. 18.

¹⁸⁹ Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, p. 30-1, and D. H. French, 'The Roman road-system of Asia Minor', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II. 7. 2 (1980), p. 698.

¹⁹⁰ P. Kehne, 'War and Peacetime Logistics; Supplying Imperials in East and West', in P. Erdkamp ed., *A Companion to the Roman Army* (Malden, 2007), p. 329.

¹⁹¹ Strabo, *Geographica*, trans. H. L. Jones, *The Geography of Strabo* (London, 1917), p. 275.

the widespread practice of road construction and necessary repair within the empire, this meagre literary record is curious.

One reason for this may be the decentralised military supply system adopted by the empire from the time of Augustus onwards. With the legions largely displaced along the borders of the empire, in widely differing economic conditions, coupled with the inherent mistrust of almost every Roman emperor of any concentration or centralisation of imperial functions or powers in hands other than his own, a general organisation of military logistics was an impossibility.¹⁹² Road construction, therefore, likely relied more on an ad hoc appropriation of local materials and resources rather than conforming to a standardised template. The vast number of different construction techniques that have subsequently been uncovered indicates that there was no universal method of road construction.¹⁹³

Nevertheless, a number of constants in Roman road construction can be observed. By far their most defining feature is their straightness. The question as to why, exactly, Roman engineers were so fastidious in constructing roads as straight as physically possible has excited a great deal of debate. One simple answer may be that since a straight line is the shortest route between two points, this option involved the least amount of effort, which was likely an important consideration when the costs of construction were factored in.¹⁹⁴ The unerring accuracy of Roman roads over long distances, where they were able to ascertain the exact direction between one city and the next to a fraction of a degree, is impressive even by modern road construction standards.¹⁹⁵ Routes, therefore, would have most likely been chosen in advance, and a preference given to those which would have allowed the road to remain as straight as possible.

The famous straightness of Roman roads, however, can lead to misleading conclusions being drawn. Roman roads certainly were straight wherever they could possibly be, but they were not immune to the influences of local geography. Roman roads were constructed, whenever the ground permitted, in a rectilinear fashion, in that they were laid out in straight sections from one point of view to the next.¹⁹⁶ Where the road did need to change direction, it did so typically on hill tops, where the next point of view came into sight, and changes of direction were angular, not curved.¹⁹⁷ In hilly terrain, therefore, Roman roads frequently made changes of direction, although Roman engineers always

¹⁹² Kehne, 'War and Peacetime Logistics', p. 326.

¹⁹³ For an overview of some of the many different types of Roman roads, see R. J. Forbes, *Notes on the history of ancient roads and their construction* (Amsterdam, 1964), p. 131-151.

¹⁹⁴ T. Bekker-Nielsen, *The Roads of Ancient Cyprus* (Copenhagen, 2004), p. 87.

¹⁹⁵ H. E. H. Davies, 'Designing Roman roads' *Britannia*, 29 (1998), p. 3.

¹⁹⁶ Davies, 'Designing Roman Roads', p. 5.

¹⁹⁷ Collingwood, *The Archaeology of Roman Britain*, p. 2.

sought to maintain the principle of straight lines as much as possible.¹⁹⁸ This meant that Roman roads typically negotiated hills directly, rather than obliquely, and as a consequence gradients on Roman roads were often quite high, sometimes well over 10%, which is beyond what is generally tolerated on modern roads.¹⁹⁹

6.1: Construction

Even today the immense scale of the construction of Roman roads is impressive. Roman roads were colossal undertakings, developed with intimidatingly large foundations and then built up with successive layers of stonework. The effort involved in their construction, not to mention the costs involved, would have been enormous.

Owing to the lack of surviving technical manuals, the methods of Roman road construction are not completely known. The first-century poet, Statius, recorded his impressions of observing a work gang involved in the construction of the *Via Domitiana*. He described how furrows were first traced to delineate the route, and that any existing tracks or paths were cleared away as a deep trench was dug.²⁰⁰ Statius was fascinated by the widespread activity associated with road construction and noted that whilst the trench was being dug further preparation was being carried out along the route, with hills being cleared of trees, and hand driven pumps used to drain groundwater. It should be noted, however, that Statius provides only a very general description of road construction, and he may have been more concerned with flattering the road's benefactor, Domitian, in his description of the energy and enthusiasm with which it was constructed, than he was in providing an accurate depiction.²⁰¹ It is also notable that Domitian had explicitly requested that no expense be spared in its construction, suggesting that this was road construction under uniquely favourable conditions.²⁰²

The architect Vitruvius also provides a description of the deeply dug trench that served to accommodate the foundations of a road. Owing to the mass of material involved in the road's construction, it was imperative that it lay on firm ground, and so sometimes the foundations were dug

¹⁹⁸ Collingwood, *The Archaeology of Roman Britain*, p. 4.

¹⁹⁹ In Australia, for instance, maximum grades vary between 3% and 10%, with major roads typically limited to gradients of less than 7%.

http://www.tams.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/396857/ds03_roaddesign.pdf (accessed, 22/1/2016).

²⁰⁰ Statius, *Silvarum*, trans. D. A. Slater, *The Silvae of Statius* (Oxford, 1908), p. 149.

²⁰¹ Codrington, *Roman Roads in Britain*, p. 9.

²⁰² B. W. Jones, *The Emperor Domitian* (London, 1992), p. 72.

so deeply that the road lay directly upon the underlying bedrock. Where this was not possible the foundations were often reinforced through ramming of the soil, piles or brushwood. This solid floor (*rudratio*) was then built up in successive layers of fist sized stones (*statumen*), then gravel and sand (*rudus*), before the surface was given a covering of paving stones (*pavimentum*).²⁰³ The *rudus* acted as a watertight layer that shut out damp from the *statumen*, and the two together formed the foundation proper. A *nucleus* of concrete was then applied, into which the paving stones were tightly fitted. Further, a central spine was sometimes added to the road to assist in drainage. This technique of construction was not followed universally however, because sometimes the four distinct layers were replaced by just the two, particularly in mountainous regions where the road was built atop of a naturally solid surface.²⁰⁴ Similarly plaster was sometimes used to fix the paving stones in place, but this was only typically done when the road was required to traverse exceptionally difficult ground.²⁰⁵

The careful work required to prepare the foundations emphasises the massive nature of the road itself. Roman roads have been referred to as ‘walls on the flat’, and the analogy is a good one.²⁰⁶ Roman roads were extremely dense and solid, utilising construction methods similar to those used in fortifications. These massive foundations are the prime reason for the incredible longevity of Roman roads, yet they also posed complications too.

The necessity of preparing solid foundations limited the areas where roads could be constructed. Regions which lacked solid bedrock especially needed to be avoided. This included areas that were prone to becoming swampy or marshy, such as along valley floors or alongside rivers. Therefore, when Roman roads travelled along valleys, they did so along one side instead of the valley floor, which necessitated large embankments to be built up to provide a level surface and to support the road surface.

It was the tightly fitted *pavimentum* that frequently proved the weak link however. The use of a concrete *nucleus* created an extremely rigid surface that allowed no provision for contraction or expansion in extreme weather conditions. Extreme heat could cause the stone slabs to expand, buckle and then crack, whilst in cold environments water seeped under the stones and then expanded as it froze, separating the pavement from the foundations.²⁰⁷ Such phenomenon, repeated season after season, could cause the surface of a sturdily constructed road to begin to disintegrate. It is for this

²⁰³ Vitruvius, *De architectura*, trans. M. H. Morgan, *Vitruvius: ten books on architecture* (London, 1914), p. p. 202-3.

²⁰⁴ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 33.

²⁰⁵ Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, p. 83.

²⁰⁶ R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* (Leiden, 1972), p. 149.

²⁰⁷ L. White, ‘Technology and Invention in the Middle Ages’, *Speculum*, 15, no. 2 (April, 1940), p. 150-1.

reason that the best surviving roads today are found in regions of less extreme climate variation, such as are typically found around the Mediterranean basin.

This rigidly constructed surface puts Roman roads at odds with modern road construction, which favours an elastic surface composed of more plastic material, such as cobble or macadam.²⁰⁸ This type of surface does not require the heavy foundations of Roman roads, as their elastic quality allows them to take on the properties of the underlying material. Indeed it is notable that no society ever again attempted to construct roads in the prohibitively expensive and labour intensive manner adopted by the Roman Empire. In particular the Roman usage of concrete ultimately prohibited their experimentation with far more efficient materials. For the Romans, however, the distinction may have remained a purely academic one; the primary requirement of their roads was to accommodate large numbers of marching men in every season of the year, and they were ideally suited to that role.²⁰⁹

6.2: Stations

The development of roadside stations occurred alongside that of Roman roads themselves and they emerged primarily as market places, *fora*, to serve road traffic. It was during the reign of Augustus that this system came to become formalised, specifically with the development of the state post system, the *cursus publicus*.²¹⁰ The system was further organised when Emperor Claudius decreed that rest houses and official quarters (*mansiones*) were to be built along military roads, in order to free the public from forced billets.²¹¹

The post system was divided into two branches: the slow post of ox carts and similar heavy vehicles, and the fast post which covered faster moving pack animals, light carts and horses or ponies.²¹² Indeed one of the reasons why the foundations of Roman roads were so securely constructed was to accommodate these oxen packs, and the large wagon loads they conveyed, all year round.

²⁰⁸ Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, p. 149. It must be noted, however, that since not all Roman roads were the same, some may have indeed possessed a relative plasticity, see A. Leighton, *Transport and communication in Early Medieval Europe AD 500-1100* (Newton Abbot, 1972), p. 51.

²⁰⁹ Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, p. 159.

²¹⁰ An overview of the operation of *cursus publicus* is provided by A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: a social, economic and administrative survey* (Oxford, 1973), p. 830-4.

²¹¹ Kehne, 'War and Peacetime Logistics', p. 328.

²¹² J. Haldon, 'Economy and Administration; how did the Empire work?', in M. Maas ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 33-4.

The fast post enabled emperors to secure information and tribute from the distant parts of the empire in as speedily a manner as possible, and it was preferred to use a single man to transport news, so that they could also be questioned if needed. According to Procopius the fast post consisted of a number of 'stages' (usually between five and eight) across the distance a courier could be expected to cover in a single day, with approximately 40 horses, and an accompanying number of grooms, located at each stage.²¹³ In Procopius' opinion this allowed a single courier to cover as much territory in one day that they would have otherwise have been capable of covering in ten.²¹⁴

The speed at which the fast post operated is a fiercely debated one, particularly since conclusions drawn from the operation of the fast post have, at times, been used to demonstrate the potential rate of march of armies along Roman roads generally.²¹⁵ Evidence garnered from ancient sources can tend to be misleading, however, as the times of journeys recorded therein are likely to be exceptional.²¹⁶ An example is when Suetonius famously claimed that Julius Caesar was able to travel 100 miles a day for eight days in a row in a hired carriage.²¹⁷ Ramsay calculates that each of Procopius' stages were approximately eight and a third Roman miles apart, and as such a courier would therefore typically cover between 41 and 67 Roman miles a day, depending on the terrain and the weather.²¹⁸ Theophanes, in the early fourth century, covered 64 Roman miles in a single day, between Laodicea and Antioch, although this was again probably an exceptional occurrence, and likely the result of Theophanes separating from the main travelling party and riding ahead with only one or two travelling companions.²¹⁹

A number of different road side stations developed along each route, and it is at times problematical to differentiate between these types as each station developed differently, and largely in relation to the size of the market it offered and the specifics of the local terrain.²²⁰ The first two types to emerge were *tabernae* and *praetoria*, the latter serving as inns that accommodated high-standing persons and military officials of high rank and were built of stone, whilst the former were typically of wooden construction and served as a place of lodging for ordinary travellers and couriers.²²¹ A third type, the

²¹³ Procopius, *The Secret History*, trans. G. A. Williamson (Harmondsworth, 1981), p. 187-8.

²¹⁴ Procopius, *The Secret History*, p. 188.

²¹⁵ A. Ramsay, 'The Speed of the Roman Imperial Post', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 15 (1925), p. 62.

²¹⁶ Ramsay, 'The Speed of the Roman Imperial Post', p. 67.

²¹⁷ Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum*, trans. J. Cavorse, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (New York, 1931), p. 34.

²¹⁸ Ramsay, 'The Speed of the Roman Imperial Post', p. 73.

²¹⁹ Matthews, *The Journey of Theophanes*, p. 67.

²²⁰ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 48.

²²¹ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 48.

stabulum appears to have developed in the mid-second century, serving as a shelter for animals, a cattle-shed and horse-station, whilst also providing the standard amenities of a *taberna*.²²²

These stations were expected to service the needs of all travellers on the road, and therefore would fulfil a wide variety of functions. Inside and around them developed whole communities, in which a traveller could find inns, shops, craftsman's workshops, eating houses, brothels, and even altars, shrines and sanctuaries offered to different deities from the Greco-Roman pantheon.²²³

For the sake of convenience the whole system of stations can be roughly divided into two distinct groups; the *mutationes*, which were smaller and typically comprised of an inn and a stables where a traveller could find rest and fresh mounts during each day's journey, and the larger *mansiones*, which were located approximately one day's march from each other. The *mansiones* were typically positioned at a distance from each other of about 18-20 Roman miles (approximately 25-30 kilometres) in good terrain, and from 6 to 12 miles (13 to 18 kilometres) in mountainous regions.²²⁴

6.3: Financing

One unmistakable feature of Roman roads were the costs involved, and it has been estimated that the cost of the construction of a road, including all the accompanying features such as bridges, stations and milestones, amounted to approximately 500,000 sesterii per mile.²²⁵ Owing to the extraordinary difficulties involved in converting the sesterii to modern monetary values, it is difficult to quantify this expense directly. One interesting comparison is provided by Lt. Col. C. J. Napier, who, whilst inspecting the road networks of Cephalaria in 1825, estimated that fifty men could construct new roads, fifteen feet wide, at a rate of two miles per year for the cost of three hundred dollars per mile, which indicates that not only was road building an expensive business, it was also an incredibly time consuming one.²²⁶

Road construction in the empire passed through many stages of development, from literal cattle trails, to paved roads constructed of broken stone. Early Roman roads therefore tended to vary greatly in terms of width, with unpaved routes often being extraordinarily wide, being mostly used to drive

²²² Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 46.

²²³ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 48.

²²⁴ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 51.

²²⁵ T. Kissel, 'Road Building as a *munus publicus*', in P. Erdkamp ed., *The Roman Army and the Economy* (Amsterdam, 2002), p. 130.

²²⁶ C. J. Napier, *Memoir on the roads of Cefalaria* (Athens, 1977), p. 25.

herds of cattle from one location to the next.²²⁷ An early attempt at standardisation came in *The Law of the Twelve Tables*, which proscribed that ‘Where a road runs in a straight line, it shall be eight feet, and where it curves, it shall be sixteen feet in width’.²²⁸ During the reign of Emperor Augustus road widths became more formalised, with paved major highways (*viae munitae*) being at least 5.5 metres wide, this being the minimum width necessarily to allow two wagons to pass each other.²²⁹

This distinction has led to the categorisation of Roman roads as either primary or secondary; primary roads were typically at least five metres wide and covered the great trunk routes of the empire. Secondary roads were narrower, often three metres wide, and typically acted as arterial routes connecting the great highways.²³⁰ Although a great number of different road types are named in the sources, such as *viae publicae*, *viae private*, *viae vicinales*, and so on, in terms of identifying roads in regards to archaeological evidence, it is more feasible to regard roads as being simply either vehicular or non-vehicular. Vehicular roads (or highways) are usually at least twice the width of non-vehicular roads (or roadways) and often possess a centred spine to assist in drainage.²³¹

Although the army traditionally played an important role in the construction of roads, from the second century BC onwards there is evidence that provincial authorities also assumed some responsibility for this task.²³² One incentive for the state to formalise the road building process likely arose out of concern over the occasional fraudulence of building contractors so employed, who constructed substandard roads, at a great cost to the public purse.²³³ Likely in response to rapidly amounting costs, Augustus determined that the necessary financial investment would need to be provided by those communities through which the roads ran (*civitates stipendarie*).²³⁴ Regional governors and landowners were therefore given the authority to raise extra taxes to cover the expenses incurred, and according to the Roman legal scholar Hermogenianus, the repair of roads was determined to be a public concern (*munus personale*).²³⁵

Owing to a lack of surviving evidence, it is difficult to determine how this worked in practice. One example, detailed by the Roman surveyor, Siculus Flaccus, records that roads were to be maintained publicly (*publice muniuter*) by public employers (*redemptores/mancipes*) and landowners (*possessors*)

²²⁷ Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, p. 2-5.

²²⁸ *Leges Duodecim Tabularum*, C. Pharr ed., *Ancient Roman statutes: a translation, with introduction, commentary, glossary, and index* (Austin, 1961), p. 11.

²²⁹ Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, p. 147.

²³⁰ For a discussion on road widths, see Bekker-Nielsen, *The Roads of Ancient Cyprus*, p. 92-3.

²³¹ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 38.

²³² Forbes, *Notes on the history of ancient roads and their construction*, p. 156.

²³³ Tacitus, *Annals*, trans. J. Humphrey, J. Oleson & A. Sherwood eds. *Greek and Roman Technology: A sourcebook* (London, 1998), p. 412.

²³⁴ Kissel, ‘Road Building as a *munus publicus*’, p. 130.

²³⁵ Kissel, ‘Road Building as a *munus publicus*’, p. 135.

from whom at times a direct amount was demanded by imperial authorities for the maintenance of roads (*tutelam per tempora summa certa exigitur*).²³⁶ However this example seems to apply only to public roads within Italy itself, and the critical office of *curator viarum* is unknown throughout the rest of the empire.²³⁷

According to the Roman jurist Ulpian, rather than belonging to a specific office, in the provinces the responsibility for road construction, alongside maintenance and implementation of new building projects, was assumed by the provincial governor, who would delegate this duty to his subordinates (*curators operum*). Much of the road construction work was then done by large groups of seasonal or itinerant workers who were hired by building contractors (*mancipes viarum*).²³⁸ Governors were also empowered to raise levies in order to pay for the costs incurred by these building projects. However it also seems that, increasingly, maintenance of roads was carried out by local populations along the route. This occurred either in lieu of the payment of specific levies, or by compulsory exactions. An inscription from Thrace dated to AD 202, for instance, mentions that villagers in the territory of Alexandroupolis and Traianopolis were required to repair a section of the *Via Egnatia*. Milestones served as a convenient means to demarcate which sections of the road were the responsibility of which community along its length.²³⁹ Although inscriptions might dedicate the finished work to an emperor, in this arrangement he was likely the mere recipient, with local cities acting as donors, and with provincial authorities assuming the entire cost of construction.²⁴⁰

Such a measure must have been an extremely cost effective one, considering the rate at which repair work was required. Research on Roman roads in Spain suggests that roads which saw little traffic could last for as long as 70-100 years before requiring maintenance, however on more heavily trafficked routes a time span of 30-40 years is more likely.²⁴¹ Climate no doubt played a large role in determining the frequency of repairs required, but the largest single factor was traffic, as the movement of troops, with their associated baggage trains, could cause a great damage to the road surface. Along frequently used corridors, particularly those where the Roman legions mustered for major campaigns, the quality of the road surface must have been an ongoing concern. Soldiers were therefore likely pressed into making repairs themselves as they marched, and Xenophon cites an example where along the Royal

²³⁶ Siculus Flaccus, *De condicionibus agrorum*, in C. Thulin, *Corpus agrimensurum romanorum* (Stuttgart, 1971), p. 110.

²³⁷ Kissel, 'Road Building as a *munus publicus*', p. 135.

²³⁸ Kissel, 'Road Building as a *munus publicus*', p. 155.

²³⁹ Kissel, 'Road Building as a *munus publicus*', p. 140.

²⁴⁰ Bekker-Nielsen, *The Roads of Ancient Cyprus*, p. 99-100.

²⁴¹ C. E. Van Sickle, 'The repair of roads in Spain under the Roman Empire', *Classical Philology*, 24, no. 1 (Jan, 1929).

Road Persian generals commanded soldiers to march ahead of the column with axes, mattocks and shovels.²⁴²

Imperial authorities would have been very aware of the necessity of keeping major routes in a high state of repair. An inscription dating to the reign of Vespasian claims that if a road was not well maintained it could cost as much to restore the road as it did to originally construct it, '*restitutori aedium sacrarum quod vias urbis neglegentia superiorum temporum corruptas sua impensa restitui*'.²⁴³ The reason for this expense was that the proper repair of a road required extensive work, involving the opening up of the surface, completely cleaning out the *pavimentum*, reapplying the *nucleus*, before restoring the surface to its original state.²⁴⁴ If the foundations had been compromised, by flood or landslide for example, restoration efforts would need to be even more extensive.

The impact of using non-specialist labour to carry out these repairs can only be imagined. It's quite feasible that rather than completely restoring the road surface, unskilled work gangs were employed by provincial authorities to instead merely fill in any opening in the surface with crushed rock, or other easily obtained material. The use of compulsory exactions to maintain roads (along with the inevitable corruption of provincial officials who were charged with financing the operation) has been described as a fundamental mistake, one that led to the eventual breaking down of the entire road system.²⁴⁵ Whilst this is most likely correct, it is difficult to envision how the Roman Empire of the fourth or fifth centuries could have acted otherwise, given its reduced means and the extensive road system that it had inherited. Regional governors frequently found other issues more pressing than the maintenance of public roads, in particular the maintenance of city fortifications, and in any case it is arguable that the empire retained the engineering skills necessary for the task.

Ultimately Roman roads had been constructed with a specific purpose in mind; the large scale movement of infantry and material to the frontiers during all periods of the year, and in this role they proved to be of exceptional value to the growing empire. As the empire's ability to maintain its borders declined, however, so did the quality of those roads that serviced them.

²⁴² Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, trans. J. Humphrey, J. Oleson & A. Sherwood eds. *Greek and Roman Technology: A sourcebook* (London, 1998), p. 415.

²⁴³ W. Henzen, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Vol. 6, Inscriptiones urbis Romae Latinae*, 931 = ILS 245 (Berlin, 1882), p. 3070.

²⁴⁴ Kissel, 'Road Building as a *munus publicus*', p. 131.

²⁴⁵ Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, p. 155.

Chapter 7: Byzantine Roads

If little is known of the mechanics or financing of Roman road construction, even less is known of those built by the Byzantine Empire. It is usually implicitly accepted that Roman roads transformed, over time, into Byzantine ones, although the distinction between the two is seldom explicitly defined.²⁴⁶ As will be shown below, the practice of equating Roman roads with Byzantine ones can lead to erroneous conclusions being drawn, yet, owing to the absence of literary sources or archaeological field work, the two are typically regarded as being synonymous.

Over the course of its history the Byzantine state was able to integrate politically, economically and culturally lands and people that today comprise of over a dozen different independent states.²⁴⁷ This on its own argues for the existence of a highly organised administration overseeing the development and maintenance of the infrastructure necessary to connect these disparate regions to the imperial capital of Constantinople. It is puzzling, therefore, that so little evidence of such apparatus exists, and after the reign of Justinian there is no direct evidence relating to the central-direction of road building or maintenance, even in the laudatory accounts of the building programs of emperors such as Basil II.²⁴⁸

Against this backdrop of administrative uncertainty is the reality that, in the late eleventh century and throughout the twelfth, large numbers of crusaders were able to pass along the *Via Militaris* as they travelled to the Holy Land. Whilst the crusader sources contain the occasional complaint about local conditions, in particular along the Morava and Nishava river valleys, they are on the whole remarkably quiet on the topic of Balkan roads, particularly in contrast to what faced them in Asia Minor, where roads were so bad crusaders would occasionally wander off them and become lost. This comparative lack of remonstrance within the sources as to conditions encountered throughout much of the Balkans suggests that local conditions, on the whole, proved adequate to the crusaders needs, and were therefore not especially remarkable. This is particularly notable given that the logistical needs of the crusaders were in themselves, exceptional. The *Via Militaris* was required to accommodate armies numbering in the tens of thousands, along with associated followers, wagons, and all the other paraphernalia a crusading army took along with it. A dilapidated, forgotten route simply could not have accommodated such hosts without placing upon them logistical pressures so large that the sources would almost certainly have acknowledged them.

²⁴⁶ French, 'A Road Problem: Roman or Byzantine?', p. 445.

²⁴⁷ McCormick, 'Byzantium on the move: imagining a communications history', p. 3.

²⁴⁸ Haldon, 'Roads and communications in the Byzantine Empire: wagons, horses, and supplies', p. 137.

It is nevertheless certain that the Roman road network that the Byzantines inherited underwent a process of gradual decline, culminating in many roads becoming unusable in even good weather conditions. It has been argued that after the loss of its Egyptian provinces in particular, the attendant dramatic reduction in tax income led to a radical transformation of late Roman institutions, which almost certainly impacted upon road maintenance and repair.²⁴⁹ The decline of major roads in the empire however was already well advanced by this time, and by the early fifth century the *Codex Theodosianus* refers to the '*immense ruin of the highways*'.²⁵⁰ The *Via Egnatia* was described by Malchos of Philadelphia in the late fifth century as being in such a state of disrepair that travellers could barely pass along it,²⁵¹ and it was furthermore described by Procopius as being in the sixth century '*for the most part uneven; and if rain chanced to fall it became a bog and was difficult for travellers to get through.*'²⁵²

A further example is provided by Theophylact Simocatta, who described the difficulties faced by the general Comentiolus as he attempted to make his way back to Constantinople after campaigning on the Danube against Avar raiders in 599 AD. Owing to the uniqueness of the passage, it warrants being reproduced in full;

'But Comentiolus, as if he were with difficulty coming round from lengthy dreams, appeared to be released from his illness. Accordingly he reached Novae, assembled some of the inhabitants, and demanded to be given a guide by them so that he might pass across the Track of Trajan, as it is called: for he was hastening to Byzantium to spend the coming winter season. And so the inhabitants dissuaded Comentiolus from this particular path; enraged at this, he executed two of those who were dissuading him. And so the men of Novae declared to Comentiolus that they did not have anyone to show the way, but that twelve miles distant was an exceedingly ancient old man, whom they guaranteed knew the Track of the emperor Trajan, as it is called. Then the general Comentiolus came to that place, and demanded that the veteran act as guide for the journey. But the old man was perplexed and distressed; he predicted to the general the extreme difficulty of the enterprise, and described in detail the difficult terrain, the wintry conditions, and the wildness of the track: for this track had not been traversed in ninety years. Then the general opposed the old man's words, and after the worse plan had prevailed the Roman troops began their journey. During these very days, there was a visitation of an abnormally severe cold, a heavy frost occurred, and the biting winds pressed strongly,

²⁴⁹ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 47.

²⁵⁰ *Codex Theodosianus*, p. 431.

²⁵¹ Malchos of Philadelphia, *Byzantiaka*, ed., R. C. Blockley, *The fragmentary classicising historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus, Vol 2: text, translation and historiographical notes* (Liverpool, 1983), p. 440.

²⁵² Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, trans. H. B. Dewing, *Buildings* (London, 1940), p. 285.

so that many of the force and the greatest portion of the baggage animals perished. So Comentiolus was most thoroughly execrated when he reached Philippopolis. Then he remained there for the whole of the winter season, and at the beginning of spring he came to Byzantium.²⁵³

The 'Track of Trajan' described by Simocatta is not the road through the Gates of Trajan, but more likely the *Via Trajana*, a road that connected Philippopolis with the important legionary barracks located at Oescus, through the Troyan Pass in the Central Balkan Mountains.²⁵⁴ This had been an important route in the late Roman Empire, and excavations of its surface show that it was exceptionally wide in parts.²⁵⁵ From the city of Novae this is a much shorter route to reach Philippopolis than travelling via the Gates of Trajan (Figure 9). However, with the abandonment of the legionary barracks along the Danubian frontier it is quite possible this particular route had been unused for some time, and allowed to fall into a state of ruin.

²⁵³ Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae*, trans. M & M Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta* (Oxford, 1986).

²⁵⁴ Hoddinott believes this passage indicates the use of either the Troyan or Shipka passes, Hoddinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity*, p. 336. See also V. Beševliev, 'Bemerkungen über die Antiken Heeresstrassen im Ostteil der Balkanhalbinsel', *Klio: Beiträge zur alten Geschichte*, 51 (1969).

²⁵⁵ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 33-5.

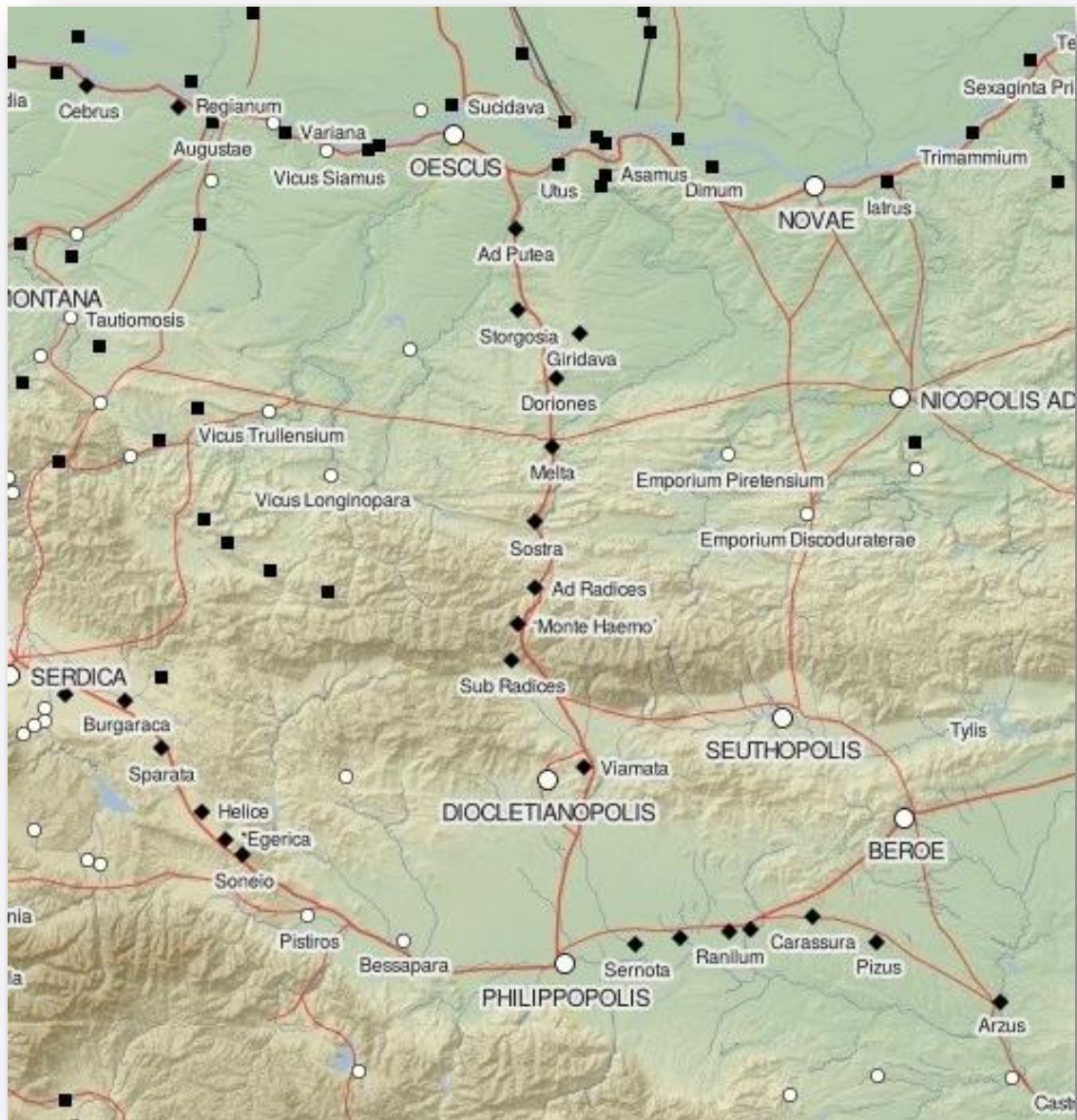


Figure 9: The 'Track of Trajan' ran north-south, connecting Philippopolis and the Danubian barracks at Oescus. Map captured from <http://pleiades.stoa.org/>

Whilst it is sometimes argued that, owing to the expense involved, the Byzantine state simply abandoned the practice of road maintenance,²⁵⁶ there is some evidence that road construction and maintenance continued, albeit it is difficult to determine how widespread or effective it was. Literary evidence suggests that the Byzantines continued the Roman practice of charging provincial governors with the responsibility of maintaining roads within their jurisdiction. Initially this was overseen by a

²⁵⁶ L. White, 'Technology in the Middle Ages', in M. Kranzberg & C. W. Pursell Jr eds., *Technology in Western Civilization* (New York, 1967), p. 66-7.

council of heredity landowners, known as the *bouleutai*, who assumed responsibility for the collection of taxes, billeting of troops and repairing roads, amongst other tasks.²⁵⁷ By the mid-sixth century such autonomous institutions had begun to decline, and the state took a far more active role in overseeing such obligations. Book XXVI of Justinian's *Novellae*, for instance, contains detailed instructions to the newly installed *praetor* of Thrace. Chapter IV proscribes that '*He must look after the public works in his province, and must not permit ports, walls, bridges, roads or anything else, to fall to pieces, but must see to it that they are restored, as far as possible, with municipal funds*'.²⁵⁸

The care and maintenance of infrastructure, '*viarum et pontium sollicitudo*', mentioned within the *Novellae* of Justinian is also repeated in a number of later sources, including the late ninth century *Basilika*, and further references to *οδόστρωσία* (paving) and *γεφύρωση* (bridging) can be found in sources up to the twelfth century.²⁵⁹ Constantine Porphyrogenitus also makes mention of the responsibilities of military governors, in particular noting how, before commencing on a campaign, the emperor should take note of which roads were to be used, and to ensure that they were in good condition.²⁶⁰

Other than these examples, direct references to either road building or maintenance in Byzantine sources are rare. Procopius records that during the reign of Justinian the Thracian road to Constantinople, near Rhegion, was repaved. Procopius describes the surface of the road in some detail, noting the paving stones were '*very carefully worked so as to form a smooth and even surface, and they give the appearance not simply of being laid together at the joints, or even of being exactly fitted, but they seem actually to have grown together*'.²⁶¹ Procopius' emphasis on the quality of the road's surface suggests that it was probably to some degree exceptional, and in particular the effort taken in its reconstruction was likely owing to the road's proximity to Constantinople, and the prominent role this route assumed during triumphal entrances into the capital.

Further work was carried out by Justinian on a road in Bithynia, and another that ran northward from Antioch, towards Cilicia.²⁶² Similarly a stretch of road that linked the important cities of Antioch and Aleppo has been dated as having been constructed in the fifth century, in part over a pre-existing

²⁵⁷ Whittow, *The making of Byzantium, 600-1025*, p. 57.

²⁵⁸ *Novellae Constitutione*, trans. F. H. Blume, *Annotated Justinian Code, 2nd edition*, University of Wyoming, College of Law, http://www.uwyo.edu/lawlib/blume-justinian/aic-edition-2/novels/1-40/novel%2026_replacement.pdf (accessed, 22/1/2016)

²⁵⁹ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World*, p. 52-3.

²⁶⁰ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *What should be observed when the Emperor intends to go on an expedition*, trans. J. Haldon, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, three treatises on imperial military expeditions* (Vienna, 1990), p. 83-5.

²⁶¹ Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, p. 286-7.

²⁶² Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, p. 286-7.

road surface, and displays evidence of even later repair work.²⁶³ These are isolated examples, however, and all are concerned with improving the approaches to major cities. It is unlikely that even in the sixth century the Byzantines possessed either the resources or technical skills necessary to carry out this sort of construction work on a large scale, and outside of those specific instances mentioned by Procopius the sophisticated paving techniques practiced during the Roman period likely fell into abeyance. Certainly it appears evident that many of the road stations that once populated the major routes simply ceased to function between the fourth and seventh centuries, and subsequent uncertainty over their location makes it difficult to determine the route of the medieval *Via Militaris* with any conviction.²⁶⁴

More generally Ramsay argues that in the early Byzantine period many Roman roads were adapted to meet the demands of the rapidly changing demography of the empire, as the cities of the Roman era declined, and new population centres emerged.²⁶⁵ Evidence of this can be seen along the *Via Militaris*, where the previously important Roman town of Heraclea on the Marmara coast (the ancient Greek town of Perinthos) was bypassed by a new, more direct, route that connected the road to the city of Selymbria that had been revived during the reign of Arcadius.²⁶⁶ Population decline, particularly after the sixth century, when the empire was subjected to plague and repeated invasions, would have rendered sections of the existing road network redundant. The decay of the 'Track of Trajan' noted above may represent one such example of this phenomenon, as the formerly important legionary barracks along the Danube were abandoned, the roads which had connected them with the Maritsa Valley also fell into disuse. In consequence, the empire of the seventh century onwards would have required an appreciably different road network, of a different composition and servicing different routes, than that of the preceding centuries.

The picture of the medieval road network is somewhat clearer in the Anatolian provinces. Owing to more favourable climatic conditions surviving roads are more prevalent here than in the Balkans, and a number of surveys have catalogued the remains of Byzantine roads in the region, and attempted to reconstruct the overall Byzantine road network.²⁶⁷ Ramsay argues a 'Great Military Road' that ran to Caesarea and Sebasteia played a prominent role in the history of the region, marking the route taken by emperors towards the frontiers, and was the site of mustering camps.²⁶⁸ Ramsay further remarks

²⁶³ French, 'A Road Problem: Roman or Byzantine?' p. 446-7.

²⁶⁴ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos) Tabula Imperii Byzantini, Vol. 6*, p. 132.

²⁶⁵ Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor*, p. 74.

²⁶⁶ F. von Hochstetter, 'Reise durch Rumelien im Sommer 1869', *Mittheilungen der Kaiserlich-Königlichen geographischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, 13 (1870), p. 112-130.

²⁶⁷ In particular see D. H. French, *Roman roads and milestones of Asia Minor Vol. 1 & 2* (Oxford, 1981-8).

²⁶⁸ Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor*, p. 75.

that this road was deliberately constructed and maintained by Byzantium for purely military purposes, in that it was not the most direct route across this region of Anatolia, but rather the easiest for an army to negotiate.²⁶⁹

The lack of surviving evidence: archaeological, epigraphical, literary, or otherwise, therefore does not imply that road maintenance necessarily did not occur in the Byzantine Empire. Even where compelling evidence is lacking, the routine deployment of Byzantine armies to the frontiers, as occurred on an almost yearly basis on the Byzantine-Arab frontier, argues for the maintenance of some transport networks, in particular the heavily used arterial routes.²⁷⁰ The difficulty, given the paucity of the evidence available, is in ascertaining how extensive the activity of road maintenance and construction was, and what sort of techniques were utilised.

Certainly whatever road work was undertaken by the Byzantines must have differed extensively from that employed by the Roman empire in its pomp, and perhaps the key difference between Roman and medieval roads was in their utility; Byzantine armies came to rely far more on pack animals than Roman armies had, which predominately made use of two, three and four wheeled wagons in their baggage trains, a shift that changed the nature of roads within the empire. The roads the Romans constructed were specifically designed to bear these enormous wagon loads in all seasons of the year. Within the Byzantine Empire, however, there was a far greater emphasis on short-range transport, utilising beasts of burden, than on the long-distance freight undertaken by wagons in the Roman era, and this must have inevitably altered the requirements of Byzantine road builders.²⁷¹ In short, the massive foundations and tightly paved surfaces common to Roman roads were completely unnecessary for the far humbler requirements of the Byzantine state, and as Lopez notes, even if the surface of the original Roman road had become heavily decayed, the road beds themselves could still be utilised to accommodate the passage of infantry, cavalry and pack animals.²⁷²

The rigid, heavily constructed, roads of the Roman Empire therefore came instead to be replaced with a highway of cobbles or broken stone in a loose bed of sand, a mix that could expand with heat and cold and which additionally was easily repaired.²⁷³ Often all that was required to maintain such a road was a ready supply of stone that could be broken to fill in any potholes that emerged. The paving stones of existing Roman roads were frequently used in this manner, as can be observed on repaired Byzantine roads in Anatolia. A section of the *Via Sebaste*, which negotiated the Taurus Mountains on

²⁶⁹ Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor*, p. 75.

²⁷⁰ Velkov, *The cities in Thrace and Dacia in Late Antiquity*, p. 193.

²⁷¹ M. McCormick, *Origins of European Economy: communications and commerce, A.D. 300-900* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 76.

²⁷² R. Lopez, 'The evolution of land transport in the Middle Ages', *Past and Present*, 9 (1956), p. 17.

²⁷³ Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, p. 159.

the way to Colonia Antiochia, reveals the use of spoila (such as sarcophagus and column fragments), as well as reused paving stones from the original road, where the previously formed wheel marks (ruts) are visible.²⁷⁴ It is estimated, largely based upon epigraphic evidence, that this road was constructed between 500 and 625 approximately.²⁷⁵

One distinctive feature of Roman roads that were repaired in the Byzantine empire was that on steep inclines roads tended to become 'stepped' so as to make them easier to negotiate, particularly during bad weather, for beasts of burden. Paving stones on Byzantine roads tended to be laid transversely so as to give horses and pack animals a greater hold on the road.²⁷⁶ On steep slopes these paving stones were dug into the hillside, creating steps, to further assist the accompanying pack animals. This technique dated back to ancient Greek roads, where the use of steps (*klimakes*, or *basmides*) was common.²⁷⁷ There is evidence of stepping along rehabilitated segments of the *Via Egnatia*, as well as on roads in Syria.²⁷⁸

What is not clear, however, is if all Byzantine roads were repaired in this manner. The use of stepping along the *Via Egnatia* may have been a necessary expedient to quickly and inexpensively restore sections of the route to working use. The *Via Egnatia* was arguably not necessarily a vitally important strategic route for the Byzantine Empire, as its importance had declined in conjunction with the decay of Roman Italy in the late Roman period. It is curious that the road subsequently never seems to have regained its earlier prominence, for even when Arab piracy threatened maritime links with southern Italy, no commensurate restoration of the *Via Egnatia* appears to have occurred.²⁷⁹ Instead, from the seventh century onwards, it is likely that the *Via Egnatia* remained largely dilapidated, at least further west than Thessalonica, and this situation was not improved until after Byzantine control over the region was re-established by Basil II in the early eleventh century.²⁸⁰ However even then, movement along this road was exceptionally difficult, with the narrowness of the road typically reducing progression along it to a crawl.²⁸¹

While the *Via Egnatia* came to be stepped on steep inclines, and therefore difficult, if not impossible, for wheeled vehicles to traverse, it does not necessarily follow that the *Via Militaris* was as well, and

²⁷⁴ French, 'A Road Problem: Roman or Byzantine?' p. 447-8.

²⁷⁵ French, 'A Road Problem: Roman or Byzantine?' p. 449-50.

²⁷⁶ Collingwood, *The Archaeology of Roman Britain*, p. 3.

²⁷⁷ Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, p. 136.

²⁷⁸ N. Hammond, 'The Western part of the *Via Egnatia*', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 64 (1974), p. 187.

²⁷⁹ N. Oikonomides, 'The Medieval *Via Egnatia*', in E. Zachariadou ed., *The Via Egnatia under Ottoman rule; 1380-1699* (Crete, 1996), p. 9.

²⁸⁰ Oikonomides, 'The Medieval *Via Egnatia*' p. 11-12, also Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 66-71.

²⁸¹ On the condition of this road in the eleventh century, and the difficulties it posed for participants of the First Crusade, see J. Pryor, 'Introduction: modelling Bohemond's march to Thessalonike', p. 4-6.

no evidence of stepping along the route has yet been found. In particular, the *Via Militaris* never achieved the sorts of gradients the *Via Egnatia* reached, which likely rendered the use of stepping unnecessary, or at least steps located so far apart that wheeled vehicles could still negotiate them. Contemporary investigations of the route of the *Via Egnatia* have shown that it was extremely steep in certain sections, with gradients of 16-18%, and one section in particular near Kavala reaching over 20%.²⁸² The *Via Militaris*, meanwhile, never reached even moderately comparable gradients, and even on its steepest section, as it negotiates the Succi Pass and enters the Maritsa Valley, as will be discussed further below, the gradient of the road is on average 5%, and no greater than approximately 8% at its steepest.²⁸³

Furthermore, it is arguable whether the *Via Militaris* was ever allowed to fall into complete disuse, at least not on a scale comparable to that of the western *Via Egnatia*. It is almost certain that the Byzantine state gave precedence to certain routes based on their strategic significance, and roads that linked locations that could also be supplied by sea may have been considered as routes of secondary importance. Whereas the importance of the *Via Egnatia* declined, the *Via Militaris*, linking the major cities of the Balkan Peninsula to the capital, and as importantly providing the only overland route to the middle Danube and to Central Europe beyond, was likely regarded as a route of great strategic significance, and therefore maintained to a higher standard than other, less vital, roads in the empire.

Recognition of the pre-eminent strategic status of the *Via Militaris* arguably dates from 292 AD, when Diocletian made Nikomedia the capital of the Eastern half of the empire.²⁸⁴ However the importance of the road was likely realised as early as the first century AD, owing to the ease with which it connected Northern Italy with the Balkans. Indeed it has been argued that this route, which connected Siscia (near modern Zagreb), Sirmium and Singidunum with Naissus, was at that time the most important road in the entire Roman Empire.²⁸⁵ The relative size and importance of the cities that lay along its route, in particular Adrianople, Philippopolis and Naissus, also suggest that both local administrations to guide repair work, and populations necessary to undertake it, existed in situ, a notable difference between it and the western sections of the *Via Egnatia*, which was almost entirely bereft of major population centres.

These local populations also mean that the *Via Militaris* likely remained in constant use, and therefore retained some degree of functionality. Even when no record survives to hint at their existence, it

²⁸² G. Xeidakis & E. Varagouli, 'Design and construction of Roman roads: The case of *Via Egnatia* in the Aegean Thrace, Northern Greece', *Environmental & Engineering Geoscience* March (1997), p. 128.

²⁸³ See Chapter 11 for more detailed discussion of the Succi Pass.

²⁸⁴ Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor*, p. 74.

²⁸⁵ R. Syme, *The Provincial at Rome and Rome and the Balkans, 80BC-AD14*, ed., A. Birley (Exeter, 1999), p. 206.

would be erroneous to assume that patterns of local trade along the road simply vanished after the sixth century. On the contrary, in the fertile and relatively well populated Maritsa Valley in particular, it's likely that they never did. It is also possible that the Bulgarian Empire, which seized control over large sections of the road in the beginning of the ninth century, may have also made attempts at preserving the road surface, particularly in regards to facilitating trade across the Byzantine border. The Bulgarian Empire certainly was no stranger to large scale construction projects, as evidenced by the ditch fortifications constructed along the Black Sea Coast.²⁸⁶ It has been argued that based on locally uncovered seals of customs officials, *kommerkiarioi*, overland trade between Serdica and Constantinople along the *Via Militaris* operated from the late ninth century onwards, and trading rights between the two states was the subject of a war waged from 894-6.²⁸⁷ It is therefore possible there was never the same need to completely rebuild sections of its surface from scratch, as was most likely the case for the long abandoned western sections of the *Via Egnatia*, which would explain why the two roads were so different in composition by the late eleventh century.

The administrative structures necessary to organise the maintenance of Byzantine road networks are largely unknown, and there is no record of any official title relating to the maintenance of roads within the empire. One office which may have assumed responsibility for these duties was that of the *dromos*. This office was the successor to the *cursus publicus*, the state run post system of the Roman Empire.²⁸⁸ There are seals of a '*chartouarios of the dromos of the West*' dating to the tenth and eleventh centuries, and this is thought to relate to an office that oversaw all transport activities in the western provinces of the empire (Figure 10).²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ P. Squatriti, 'Moving earth and making difference', in F. Curta ed., *Borders, Barriers, and Ethnogenesis: frontiers in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2005), p. 79-80.

²⁸⁷ A. E. Laiou, 'Regional networks in the Balkans in the Middle and Late Byzantine Periods', in C. Morrisson ed., *Trade and Markets in Byzantium* (Washington D.C., 2012), p. 128.

²⁸⁸ A. Dunn, 'The Kommerkiarios, the Apotheke, the Dromos, the Vardarios and the West', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 17 (1993), p. 17-8.

²⁸⁹ Item 1.5, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art, Vol. 1* (Washington DC, 1991), p. 3-4.



Figure 10: Seal of *Stephanos protospatharios epi tou koitonos* and *chartoularios of the dromos of the West* (XI c.). From <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/73398> (accessed, 22/1/2016).

Agents of the *dromos* were, in the Balkans at least, in addition to controlling the movement of individuals, such as diplomats, foreigners and internal security, responsible for the acquisition and redistribution of the materials in which the state dealt, and in this capacity were also charged with maintaining road networks and the provision of pack animals.²⁹⁰ In Asia Minor this had been the role of the *apotheke*, but evidence of its operation begins to disappear by the mid-eighth century, and no indication of their activity can be found at all in the western provinces of the empire. These agents were involved in tax collection and tax-farming, but also in sourcing pack animals and supplies for use by the imperial armies, and as such were likely responsible for broad geographic areas.²⁹¹ Some evidence does exist to suggest that Byzantium maintained post horses for the speedy transmission of messages and information, and their use is mentioned by Michael Psellos for instance.²⁹² Likewise, in the late eleventh century (the exact year is not certain, but possibly 1091), the *sebastocrator* Isaac raced from Constantinople to Philippopolis in ‘two days and two nights’ in order to defend his son, John, the *doux* of Dyrrachium, from charges of treason.²⁹³ This could only have been possible if fresh mounts had been readily available across the length of the journey.

In 1188 the *logothete of the dromos*, John Doukas, was sent to meet with Frederick Barbarossa in order to arrange the passage of the latter’s forces through Byzantine land as part of the Third

²⁹⁰ A. Avramea, ‘Land and Sea Communications, Fourth-Fifteenth Centuries’, in A. E. Laiou ed., *The Economic History of Byzantium: from the seventh through to the fifteenth century, Vol. 1* (Washington D.C., 2002), p. 59.

²⁹¹ N. Oikonomides, ‘The Role of the Byzantine State in the Economy’, in A. E. Laiou ed., *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Washington D.C., 2002), p. 984-5.

²⁹² Avramea, ‘Land and Sea Communications, Fourth-Fifteenth Centuries’, p. 60.

²⁹³ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 209.

Crusade.²⁹⁴ Once an accord had been reached, Emperor Isaac Angelos, in the words of Nicetas Choniates, 'proceeded to make arrangements for the collection of food supplies and issued orders that they should be immediately be transported by the provincials to those places through which the king [Barbarossa] was to pass'.²⁹⁵ This passage no doubt reflects part of Choniates' deviousness, in that by recording Isaacs' meticulous preparations to meet the crusaders he would have more evidence with which to damn the emperor for later having failed to have met them.²⁹⁶

However it also suggests that the empire still possessed the administrative ability to direct such complex logistical arrangements, and that the responsibility for the collection and transportation of supplies remained, as it had in Justinian's era, the duty of provincial governors. Although Emperor Manuel II Comnenus had made extraordinary preparations ahead of the arrival of the participants of the Second Crusade, in particular in gathering supplies at Serdica, the ability of Isaac to actually meet this obligation in 1188-9 is doubtful, as much of the Balkans was in the grips of a popular uprising that would ultimately lead to the formation of the Second Bulgarian Empire, and the capacity of the Byzantines to co-ordinate such activities in a region heavily devastated by endemic warfare must have been limited.

Whilst it therefore appears that the maintenance of roads remained largely the responsibility of provincial governors, who acted upon guidance provided by the state, who actually undertook the necessary work is unclear. It cannot simply be assumed that local military forces were used as there is an absence of evidence regarding their employment in the construction of bridges or new roads.²⁹⁷ The example of Emperor Nicephorus at Serdica, where the Byzantine army threatened to revolt after being ordered to repair the city's walls, suggests that even the construction of fortresses may have ceased to be a routine function of a soldier's life.²⁹⁸ An exception to this was whilst on campaign, where detachments were routinely sent forward to ensure the road ahead was clear. Maurice states that when traversing rough, steep, heavily wooded, or other difficult terrain, soldiers were to be sent forward to clear and level the land as much as possible, to ensure that horses in particular were not worn out.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁴ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 221.

²⁹⁵ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 221.

²⁹⁶ For more on Choniates' hostility towards Isaac see P. Magdalino, 'Aspects of twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik', *Speculum*, 58 (1983), p. 345.

²⁹⁷ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 237.

²⁹⁸ Theophanes, *Chronicle*, trans. H. Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes: an English translation of anni mundi 6095-6305 (A.D. 602-813)* (Philadelphia, 1982), p. 166.

²⁹⁹ Maurice, *Strategikon*, p. 21.

Otherwise, construction duties formally devolved onto local communities along the route. The Roman *munera publica*, the duty of citizens to provide services for the benefit of the state, and in particular one form of these duties, *munera personalia*, which typically involved physical labour such as road building or fortress construction, was adapted to the needs of the Byzantine Empire. The *Theodosian Codex* contains numerous references to the compulsory services provincial citizens were obligated to render to the state, and in particular mentions the construction and repair of roads.³⁰⁰ During the reign of the emperor Justinian this practice was codified into law, becoming an obligation for all citizens, and exemption from which could only be granted by special dispensation from the emperor.³⁰¹

Within the Byzantine Empire the appropriation of local labour by corvée was known as *angareia* or *para-angareia*. *Angareia* covered both private and public obligations, and in the former could be counted against tax obligations to the state. In the late Roman period it was exclusively associated with the state's communication service but came during the Byzantine period to cover a whole manner of obligations, including the provision of food and pack animals for military use.³⁰² A similar term, and one that was occasionally listed alongside that of *angareia*, was *epereia*, which was used by fiscal officials to designate extraordinary state 'requisitions', part of which could include services rendered to the state in lieu of tax payment.

These obligations evolved into specific new forms, such as *kastroktisia*, the construction and maintenance of fortresses, and *hodoistrosia*, which was specifically linked to road construction. The imposition of these duties is known to have existed from at least as early as the tenth century, owing to reference to freedom from these duties, or *exkousseia*, within foundation *actes* of monasteries that were established during this period.³⁰³ Maintenance of road networks in the Balkans was therefore associated with the legal appropriation of local labour by regional governors, and likely occurred largely in response to official requests from the state ahead of planned military campaigns.

The survival of local road networks was, therefore, fundamentally associated with the fate of urban settlements in the region and their associated administrative structures. That is, in order to carry out repair work relatively large urban populations were required to provide the needed labour, whilst administrative bodies were necessary to arrange and direct the work. The subject of urban continuity,

³⁰⁰ *Codex Theodosianus*, p. 431-2.

³⁰¹ *Justiniani Digesta*, trans. A. Watson, *The Digest of Justinian, Vol. 4* (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 431.

³⁰² Oikonomides, 'The Role of the Byzantine State in the Economy', p. 1000.

³⁰³ On these, and other, examples, see J. Haldon, 'The organization and support of an expeditionary force; manpower and logistics in the Middle Byzantine period', in N. Oikonomides, ed., *Byzantium at war (9th-12th c.)* (Athens, 1997), p. 143, P. Lemerle, *The Agrarian history of Byzantium from the origins to the twelfth century: the sources and problems* (Galway, 1979), p. 224. & M. Bartusis, *Land and Privilege in Byzantium: the institution of pronioia* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 67-9.

however, is perhaps the single most controversial issue in the entire history of the medieval Balkans. If, as has frequently been claimed, the Slavic and Avar incursions of the sixth and seventh centuries signalled, with the exception of a few isolated coastal enclaves, the death of Roman urban life in the Balkans, then the administrative apparatus of road maintenance must also have collapsed entirely.³⁰⁴ The question of urban continuity is therefore a key one as far as the maintenance of the *Via Militaris* is concerned. To effectively explore this question, however, it is necessary to consider the nature of urban settlement in the region from the period of Roman occupation onwards. The Romans dramatically changed the shape of human settlement in the Balkan Peninsula, and it was this environment which the Byzantine Empire inherited and was subsequently destroyed in the upheavals of the sixth and seventh centuries.

³⁰⁴ For an overview of the history of these debates see J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the seventh century; the transformation of a culture* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 93-99.

Chapter 8: The Roman Balkans

The Balkan Peninsula was completely absorbed into the Roman Empire in AD 46, during the reign of Claudius, when Thrace was made a procuratorial province. It did not become fully organised under Roman dominion, however, till the reign of Trajan, when the region became a full imperial province, under a praetorian legatus.³⁰⁵ It was at this point that the development of new Roman roads such as the *Via Militaris*, or the redevelopment of existing roads, was undertaken.

At the time of Roman occupation the region already possessed a number of highly developed urban settlements. Singidunum (modern Belgrade) had been settled by Celtic tribes in approximately the third century BC, whilst the city of Naissus (modern Niš), was founded during roughly the same period. Serdica (modern Sofia), had even older roots, having been settled as a Thracian outpost, before coming under Celtic control. The settlements of the Maritsa Valley could claim an even greater venerability, especially Philippopolis (modern Plovdiv), which has been inhabited by Thracian tribes since as early as 5000 BC, and is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, continuously inhabited site on the European continent.

The location of each of these cities was either in response to defensive requirements (such as Singidunum at the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers), on the site of prominent thermal springs (such as Serdica), or conformed to the classical Greek model of a city based around an acropolis that hosted a cult centre, such as Philippopolis.³⁰⁶ All of these cities would subsequently come to play an integral part in the Roman occupation of the region and, all lying along the future route of the *Via Militaris*, assumed key roles in the administrative networks through which Roman authority was established and enforced.

Another important feature shared by all of these sites is that they lay along river valleys, specifically either the Danube, Morava, Nishava or Maritsa rivers. It is in these river valleys that a high proportion of the arable land is to be found in the Balkans, specifically because they have been formed, and improved by, water-borne alluvium.³⁰⁷ Mountainous terrain, and the elevated plateaus, which comprise much of the rest of the region, are far less suited to traditional agricultural practices, in particular crop cultivation, which typically occurs in the valleys instead. As a consequence, in the

³⁰⁵ Ramsay, 'The Speed of the Roman Imperial Post', p. 71.

³⁰⁶ Biernacka-Lubanska, *The Roman and early-Byzantine fortifications of lower Moesia and northern Thrace*, p. 107.

³⁰⁷ A. Beshkov, 'The upper Thracian plain in Bulgarian agriculture', *Economic Geography*, 15, no. 2 (April, 1939), p. 179.

ancient and medieval periods the mountain chains of the Central Balkan and Rhodope Mountains were very lightly populated. Indeed the only evidence for significant rural populations during these periods comes within the immediate hinterland of Constantinople itself.³⁰⁸

Aside from these examples, therefore, there were few large urban centres to be found in the Balkans. The *Itinerarium Burdigalense* notes a total of ten cities in the region, seven of which lay along the *Via Militaris* (Singidunum, Viminacium, Naissus, Serdica, Philippopolis, Adrianople and Heraclea), whilst the remaining three (Bassianae, Aureus Mons, and Margus) all possessed a primarily military basis and were particularly concerned with the defence of the Danube.³⁰⁹ The establishment, in the first and second centuries, of new cities along both the routes of the *Via Egnatia* and *Via Militaris*, such as Adrianople, Plotinopolis and Trajanopolis, was aimed at establishing political administration, facilitating tax collection and the provision of essential services. As Adams points out, urbanisation was an attendant circumstance, and not necessarily the Romans' motive for the establishment of new urban centres.³¹⁰ In order to further link these cities, the construction of *tabernae* and *praetoria* along the military roads of the region was first ordered by the government of Nero in AD 65, but not accomplished till the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian. Again, owing to the low population of the region, there was a need to establish new administrative structures along these roads because the Roman state could not rely on locals to furnish the services that travellers required.³¹¹

The Romans further added to this network of cities, most prominently with the construction of large legionary barracks which formed key links in the Danubian *limes*, the most important of which were Viminacium and Nicopolis ad Istrum. Both of these carefully planned cities were established in the late first century, and at their height could have accommodated populations of close to 40,000. Such artificial urban constructs as these legionary barracks represented could not be imposed upon the environment without consequence, particularly not an environment as sparsely populated as the Balkans. The construction of legionary barracks, the supply of those legions who served in them, and the establishment of defences along the Danube itself, therefore necessitated the development of new economic networks.

In order to not only build, but also maintain these military cities, a tremendous weight of different supplies were required. Staples such as stone, iron, wood, food, nails, and rope were needed in enormous quantities. Owing to the exorbitant costs involved in transporting foodstuffs by land, much

³⁰⁸ A. H. M. Jones, *The cities of the eastern Roman provinces* (Oxford, 1971), p. 23.

³⁰⁹ Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300–1450*, p. 73.

³¹⁰ J. P. Adams, 'Communications in southeastern Thrace in the Roman period', in D. Triandaphyllos ed., *Actes. 2^e Symposium international des Etudes Thraciennes, Vol. 1* (Komotini, 1997), p. 141.

³¹¹ Adams, 'Communications in Southeastern Thrace in the Roman Period', p. 140-1.

of this material must have been sourced locally. Even the use of Danubian flotillas to secure supplies must have proven difficult, owing to the distances involved, not to mention the disruptions caused by the barbarian invasions of the third century onwards. To provide such material it appears that the Romans relied upon a system of slave worked *villae rusticae*. Archaeological surveys in the Balkans have identified a large number of such rural settlements dating down to the fourth century.³¹² The *villae* of the Maritsa Valley and Moesian plain would have, therefore, played an important role in supplying the legionary troops gathered along the frontier, in particular in the regular distribution of food supplies (*annona*).³¹³

The other prominent feature of the Roman Balkans was the presence of forts that, though typically quite small themselves (usually no larger than half a hectare in total area), were often accompanied by houses, churches and amenities that suggests the existence of permanent garrisons.³¹⁴ These fortifications were laid down in almost a checkerboard pattern on the Danubian front as well as along the main transport routes. Elsewhere they were typically constructed at a distance of 15, 30 or 60 kilometres from each other, with the whole intended to form a plan of cohesive defensiveness that would make the region impenetrable against raiding bands of barbarians from north of the Danube.³¹⁵

The Roman system of defences therefore consisted of a highly integrated series of fortifications. The first of these was nominally the Danubian limes system, the second series of fortifications ran in front of the Central Balkan range, protecting the Danubian plain, the third covered the mountain passes of the Central Balkans, whilst the fourth covered the coast of the Black Sea as far as the Bosphorus.³¹⁶ A fifth line consisted of the fortified towns of the Thracian plain and, following the course of the *Via Militaris*, contained mountain fortresses, some of which had once been refuges of the ancient Thracians, that protected the approaches to Thrace and Illyricum.³¹⁷

The subsequent picture that emerges of the Roman controlled Balkans is one of a supremely closely entwined system of communication and defensive networks, all directed towards the maintenance of

³¹² F. Curta, 'Peasants as "makeshift soldiers for the occasion": Sixth-century settlement patterns in the Balkans', in T. S. Burns & J. W. Eadie eds., *Urban Centers and Rural Contexts in Late Antiquity* (Michigan, 2001), p. 205.

³¹³ Curta, 'Peasants as "makeshift soldiers for the occasion": Sixth-century settlement patterns in the Balkans', p. 212.

³¹⁴ Curta, 'Peasants as "makeshift soldiers for the occasion": Sixth-century settlement patterns in the Balkans', p. 207.

³¹⁵ F. E. Wozniak, 'The Justinianic fortification of interior Illyricum', in R. L. Hohlfelder ed., *City, Town and Countryside in the early Byzantine era* (Michigan, 1982), p. 205-6.

³¹⁶ Biernacka-Lubanska, *The Roman and early-Byzantine fortifications of lower Moesia and northern Thrace*, p. 109.

³¹⁷ Biernacka-Lubanska, *The Roman and early-Byzantine fortifications of lower Moesia and northern Thrace*, p. 109.

the large number of soldiers who constituted the Danubian limes. Extensive fortifications were erected to protect the supply lines that linked the front line troops with the *villae* that provisioned them. These defences formed the backbone of the Roman Balkans, and were intended to protect the large cities, and smaller *villae*, of the hinterland from the depredations of barbarian raiders. Largely established during the reign of Trajan, over time this system was added to and improved. According to uncovered inscriptions, dating from between AD 172 and 180, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the fortifications of Serdica and Philippopolis were extended. Repairs to these were then made in the mid-third century, during the reign of Gallienus, probably after they were damaged during the Gothic invasion of the same century.³¹⁸

From the late third century and beginning of the fourth century onwards this defensive arrangement began to be overhauled, beginning during the reign of Diocletian, and further accelerated by Constantine. Diocletian personally made numerous journeys into Thrace, specifically in order to oversee the strengthening of fortifications in the region.³¹⁹ The growing importance of the region was demonstrated when the *Augustus*, Licinius, made Adrianople his capital, and subsequent confrontations between Constantine and Licinius were focused primarily along the route of the *Via Militaris*. The two pursued each other along its route in 314, before agreeing to an uneasy peace until, ten years later, Constantine pressed Licinius again along the same route, and forced a decisive confrontation near Adrianople.³²⁰

After securing victory against Licinius, Constantine would famously consider the city of Serdica as the site of his new Roman capital, before eventually settling upon the Greek colony of Byzantium. This decision further enhanced the strategic importance of the Central Balkan region, and Constantine lavished particular attention on the cities of Serdica and Naissus, the latter of which is reputed to have been his birthplace. Yet with this new found opulence also came new threats; the Huns and the Goths both subjected the area to heavy raids, with Naissus suffering particularly heavy treatment. The Hunnic and Gothic raids of the fourth and fifth centuries severely damaged the cohesion of the Roman Balkans, with the *villae* of the Morava Valley particularly suffering as a result of their depredations. Although archaeological evidence is admittedly sparse, it has been argued that the Roman settlements of the Morava Valley never recovered from these raids, whilst the hitherto important city of Sirmium descended into a long, and ultimately terminal, decline.³²¹

³¹⁸ S. Mitchell, 'Imperial Building in the Eastern Roman Provinces', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 91 (1987), p. 340-1.

³¹⁹ Velkov, *The cities in Thrace and Dacia in Late Antiquity*, p. 22-4.

³²⁰ Velkov, *The cities in Thrace and Dacia in Late Antiquity*, p. 26-7.

³²¹ J. Eadie, 'City and Countryside in late Roman Pannonia: The Regio Simiensis', in R. L. Hohlfelder ed., *City, Town and Countryside in the early Byzantine era* (Michigan, 1982), p. 33.

In the mid-sixth century Justinian embarked upon an ambitious building program aimed at reviving the defences of the Balkan Peninsula and ensuring the safety of the major landward routes to the capital. Justinian's building program, which was extensively chronicled by Procopius, has been the subject of enormous criticism ever since its inception, not the least by Procopius himself, who accused Justinian of bleeding the state dry in order to accomplish his vision. Its primary aim, so far as can be discerned, was to repair and improve upon existing defences that the Byzantine Empire had inherited.³²² According to Procopius, Justinian built, or rebuilt, over 600 forts in the Balkans, which is over eight times as many as were built in the Asian provinces of the empire. In this frenzy of construction activity particular attention was given to fortifications along the main transport routes, as well as the defences of the cities of the Central Balkans.

A consistently observed theme in Justinian's building program was the strengthening and heightening of existing walls, and the narrowing or even walling up of gates. In the towns and cities of the region the circuit of existing Roman walls were shortened in order to reduce the total area that needed to be defended, which in turn increased their defensiveness by means of concentrating military strength within a smaller area.³²³ These measures indicate that the population of these cities had shrunk dramatically from their Roman peaks, most likely as a consequence of endemic warfare and the great plague of the mid-sixth century which, according to Procopius, laid waste to the countryside.³²⁴ It is noticeable within Byzantine sources that whilst the designation *polis* had been used up till this time to distinguish cities from fortifications, from the end of the sixth century the distinction between a *polis* and a *kastron* (a Byzantine fort) became increasingly blurred.³²⁵

The scale of Justinian's building program was enormous and it was, arguably, partially successful in its execution. Aside from their defensive duties, forts along the route of the *Via Militaris* would also have helped protect travellers from the threat of brigandage, and provided stations in which rest, provisions, and remounts could be found. A number of fortifications so raised would survive well into the eleventh century, and many of the cities in the Balkan hinterland owed their survival (as will be seen) to their new, and far more appropriate, defences. Indeed it has been remarked that Justinian's fortification program coincided with a remarkably peaceful 20 year period for the region.³²⁶

Yet the underlying problem, as has often been raised, was one of both cost and manpower. Although the aim of the refortification efforts had seemingly been to reduce the number of men required to

³²² Wozniak, 'The Justinianic fortification of interior Illyricum', p. 206.

³²³ Biernacka-Lubanska, *The Roman and Early-Byzantine fortifications of lower Moesia and northern Thrace*, p. 219.

³²⁴ Procopius, *The Secret History*, trans. G. A. Williamson (Middlesex, 1981), p. 157.

³²⁵ A. Harvey, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire, 900–1200* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 200.

³²⁶ F. Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1250* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 58.

effectively hold each location, the number of soldiers in the empire's employ subsequently increased as a consequence of the revival of a large number of previously abandoned fortifications. Even before the end of Justinian's reign this system proved to be unworkable; garrisons in northern Greece appear to have already been severely reduced in the mid-sixth century in order to meet more pressing needs elsewhere, which opened the region to the Slavic raids of 539/40.³²⁷ The resources of the empire, sharply reduced by the plague of the mid-sixth century, as well as the raids of the preceding centuries, were stretched too thinly to adequately accommodate a building program as ambitious as Justinian's.

Even before the invasion of Avars and Slavs commenced in the late sixth century Justinian's program had already begun to fail, and this failure was rooted in the demographic decline of the Balkan Peninsula, with its subsequent economic impacts.³²⁸ In the late fifth century, for instance, owing to barbarian devastations, Thrace was unable to meet its fiscal requirements.³²⁹ Several laws promulgated in the sixth century further hint at this trend. One, issued in 505 by Emperor Anastasius, recognised the difficulties in raising taxes in Thrace and introduced strong measures for compulsory collection, whilst another, issued by Justinian in 545, made every farmer responsible for taxes from the abandoned land of his next-door neighbour.³³⁰

The Byzantine Empire appears to have been suffering under a manpower crisis, one that Justinian's fortification programme was likely aimed at alleviating. The necessity of guarding both the eastern and western frontiers simultaneously however meant that shortcuts had to be made. Accordingly Slavic incursions, particularly those that occurred from 578-583 AD, were able to almost effortlessly push aside those defences that had been specifically erected to impede them. The fortifications of the Central Balkan Mountain passes were either overcome or simply bypassed, leaving the Maritsa Valley and Thracian plain open to attack. Thrace was severely ravaged, and Slavic tribes penetrated deep into southern Greece and the Peloponnese along routes that had previously been closely guarded by well-garrisoned fortifications.³³¹ Whilst the Byzantines were able to subsequently restore the situation in the late sixth century, the chronic shortage of manpower meant that effective operations in the Balkans could only occur when the eastern frontiers were quiet. The Persian invasion of the early seventh century therefore created an opportunity in the Balkans that the Slavic tribes north of the Danube were perfectly positioned to exploit.

³²⁷ E. W. Kase ed., *The Great Isthmus Corridor route: explorations of the Phokis-Doris Expedition* (Dubuque, 1991), p. 145-6.

³²⁸ Harvey, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire, 900-1200*, p. 21-2.

³²⁹ Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300-1450*, p. 397.

³³⁰ Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300-1450*, p. 67-8.

³³¹ Kase, *The Great Isthmus Corridor route: explorations of the Phokis-Doris Expedition*, p. 145.

The Slavs, famously, came not to conquer or raid, but to settle. Once they had established themselves by force within the Central Balkans, they tended to leave the valleys and settle in the mountains, avoiding further confrontation with Byzantine forces.³³² Conditions in the sparsely populated mountain ridges proved ideal for a largely nomadic people, as the typically open, flat plateaus of the Sredna Gora Mountains in particular are well suited to transhumance practices, or the itinerant farming techniques utilised by the early Slavic tribes.³³³ Moreover, their lack of any centralised political authority made the disparate Slavic tribes impossibly difficult for Byzantium to control through the usual diplomatic means.

The decline of the Roman Balkans was, therefore, the consequence of a number of different causes. The primary symptom of this collapse seems to have been economic in scope. The legions of the Danubian limes depended upon the local *villae* to provide them with necessary supplies, whilst the *villae* in turn relied upon the defensive fortifications of the region for protection. Both of these systems therefore broke down in unison. The inability of the Danubian troops to prevent raiders from penetrating south of the Danube exposed the slave-worked *villae* to attack, which in turn undermined those troops posted on the border. Major Danubian towns, such as Castra Martis, Ratiaria, Oescus and Acra, appear to have been swiftly depopulated, and there is no further mention of them after the sixth century.³³⁴ Likewise, the *villae* of Moesia seem to have been effectively neutralised by the end of the sixth century, their surviving inhabitants most likely having fled to more secure locations elsewhere.

With the breakdown of the Danubian limes, the entire economic basis of the Roman occupation of the Balkans similarly collapsed. With their safety now severely threatened, many of the towns and villages that the Romans had artificially imposed upon the Balkan environment appear to have simply disappeared. This includes large numbers of newly fortified road stations along the *Via Militaris*, where evidence of habitation abruptly ends in the early seventh century. Yet those large urban centres that pre-dated Roman occupation, such as Naissus and Serdica, remained, tied into local patterns of trade and occupying the most agriculturally viable land in the region and furthermore protected by their fortifications newly rebuilt by Justinian.

The argument that the Slavic incursions of the sixth and seventh centuries wiped out all Roman settlement in the region is, therefore, in a sense correct. The Roman holdings of the Moesian plain, the Morava Valley and elsewhere, were destroyed in this period. The 'Roman' identity of the Balkans

³³² Kase, *The Great Isthmus Corridor route: explorations of the Phokis-Doris Expedition*, p. 146.

³³³ F. Curta, *The Making of the Slavs: history and archaeology of the lower Danube region c.500-700* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 345-6.

³³⁴ Z. Kobylnski, 'The Slavs', in P. Fouracre ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. 1 c.500-c.700* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 539.

was irretrievably shattered, and the cities of the Roman period, with their open forums and large numbers of public buildings and squares, came to be replaced instead with walled defensive fortresses, in which houses and churches alike huddled together for safety.³³⁵ The question of how many cities survived, though, and what sort of existence their populations led afterwards, is one that is still open to debate.

³³⁵ E. Kirsten, 'Die Byzantinische Stadt', *Berichte zum XI Internationalen Byzantinisten Kongress*, V, 3 (Munich, 1958), p. 1-35.

Chapter 9: The Byzantine Balkans

The argument that the Slavic incursions spelt the end of the major cities of the Balkan Peninsula has largely rested upon two passages from the Miracles of St Demetrius. The first book of miracles, written in approximately 620, contains two accounts of Slavic attacks on Thessalonica which took place in 597. References to the abandoned cities of the Balkans, however, only occur in the second book, which was probably compiled about a century later.³³⁶ The most frequently recited passage is as follows;

'they said that the city was about to be taken by the Slavs, and not only did Thessalonica stand in the midst of them, since all the cities and provinces which had formerly been under its control had become uninhabited because of the Slavs, but Thessalonica alone, so to speak, existed in their midst, and received all the refugees of the Danube regions, from Pannonia and Dacia and Dardania and the remaining provinces and cities, who were now tightly compressed inside the city'.³³⁷

The second passage relates to a joint Avaro-Slavic attack on the city in 618-9, where refugees from the cities of Serdica and Naissus were particularly noticeable, owing to their loud lamentations that they had fled from the destruction of their own cities only to perish in Thessalonica.³³⁸

Owing to its location and well-ordered defences, Thessalonica was perfectly positioned to attract the large numbers of inhabitants who were displaced by the Slavic and Avar raids of the late sixth and early seventh centuries. The Struma River valley in particular, which runs south from Serdica and is followed by the main Serdica-Thessalonica highway, was utterly devastated in this period. Archaeological excavations here suggest that, unlike in other regions which suffered similar devastation, such as the Maritsa Valley, communities in this region never fully recovered from these raids.³³⁹ Refugees from here and elsewhere would have flocked to Thessalonica in large numbers, no doubt bringing tales of widespread devastation and destruction with them. It has been argued that the emergence in the sixth century of large numbers of small houses, built of stone and clay, inside the walls of major cities like Thessalonica, indicate that these cities were inundated by dislocated rural villagers, however this identification is disputed.³⁴⁰

³³⁶ D. Abrahamse, *Hagiographic sources for Byzantine cities, 500-900 A.D.* (Michigan City, 1967), p. 68.

³³⁷ *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, trans. D. Abrahamse, *Hagiographic sources for Byzantine cities, 500-900 A.D.*, p. 70.

³³⁸ Abrahamse, *Hagiographic sources for Byzantine cities, 500-900 A.D.*, p. 71.

³³⁹ Yurukova, 'Byzantine Fortresses to the south of the Hemus Mountain in the light of coin finds from the last decades of the sixth century', p. 96.

³⁴⁰ Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250*, p. 44.

A further source of evidence that potentially argues against the survival of the cities of the Balkan Peninsula are the conciliar lists of the period. These lists, which cover the councils of 680, 692, 787 and 869, represent almost the entirety of surviving written sources across the whole region from this period. The sees represented at the councils of 680/1 and 691/2 are not only extremely few in number, but represent cities that are almost entirely limited to those on the coast (Stobi, near Gradsko in the modern day Republic of Macedonia, being the single exception).³⁴¹ It is only in the lists of 869/7 that the cities of the inland Balkans begin to reappear once more. Usage of these lists however involves the assumption of a clear equation between a secular city and an ecclesiastical see.³⁴² Whilst this is generally the case, this is problematical owing to the fact that the sites of a large number of cities or sees in the Balkans are unknown to us, and even further complicated by the fact that there is always a possibility that some of the bishops so listed may have been absentees, or even represented locations that no longer existed.³⁴³

The sparse nature of the representatives at these earlier councils need not argue for the complete destruction of urban settlement in the Central Balkans. The Bulgar Khan Krum, for instance, captured Serdica from Byzantium only in 809 AD, which renders its absence from earlier conciliar lists curious. Furthermore, whilst we know that the cities of Anchialos, Beroe and Philippopolis were restored by the Empress Irene in 784, none of these cities are recorded as having sent representatives to the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. It is not clear, therefore, whether the conciliar lists can be treated as definitive evidence, in particular since there is clear evidence that at least the see of Anchialos was occupied at this time.³⁴⁴

Largely owing to the lack of reliable sources, no clear picture of the Balkan Peninsula during this confused period has therefore emerged. For instance, based on the lack of literary evidence of recorded journeys along these routes, McCormick states that overland travel within the Balkan Peninsula definitely ceased at some point between 550 and 650 AD.³⁴⁵ Toynbee draws the conclusion, largely based on the research of the etymologist Max Vassmer, that after the death of Justinian the empire quickly lost possession of almost the entirety of its European possessions, with the exception of a few isolated beach heads on the Aegean, a conclusion also reached by Francis Dvornik.³⁴⁶

³⁴¹ Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250*, p. 99.

³⁴² Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300-1450*, p. 77.

³⁴³ For further discussion on the use of these sources see Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and his historian*, p. 186-7.

³⁴⁴ Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria, 775-831*, p. 164.

³⁴⁵ McCormick, *Origins of European Economy: communications and commerce, A.D. 300-900*, p. 69.

³⁴⁶ Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World*, p. 631., also see M. Vassmer, *Die Slaven in Griechenland* (Berlin, 1941), p. 317-25., and F. Dvornik, *The Slavs: their early history and civilization* (Boston, 1956), p. 42.

Obolensky, however, argues that the inland routes may have stayed open until the mid-eighth century, before falling into disuse, and further surmises that after the death of Khan Krum in 814, peaceful conditions prevailed along the *Via Militaris* for the rest of the century, although concedes that little to no evidence, outside of conciliar lists, exists to support this hypothesis.³⁴⁷

Conclusions drawn from the little literary evidence that exists therefore tend to fail to find support in the known archaeological record, and visa versa. On the whole, the inability of the archaeological record to provide a clear answer to the question of urban continuity in the Balkans is frustrating. Whittow argues that the failure of many archaeologists, until quite recently, to adequately catalogue low grade medieval remains in the region, in particular early medieval pottery, discounts much of their work.³⁴⁸ It is only recently that more attention has been given to such finds, and excavations undertaken at Serdica, Karasura and Castra Rubra indicate a continuation of habitation beyond the seventh century that is usually taken as the terminal point of the Roman Balkans.³⁴⁹

A closer examination of the urban histories of some of the major cities along the route of the *Via Militaris* offers some opportunity for a more detailed picture of the Byzantine Balkans to emerge, although even here broad assumptions and generalisations are, owing to the absence of sources, inevitable. Philippopolis, in particular, provides a fascinating case study of how a distinct urban community was able to develop within the medieval Balkans.³⁵⁰

The city of Philippopolis emerged in the late Roman period as an important regional centre, and its walls were repaired in the third century, during the reign of Gallienus, and again during the reign of Justinian. The city suffered a major population decline during the early Byzantine period however and, mirroring a general trend experienced by most provincial cities in this period, shrank to occupy a much smaller space than the Roman city had. The walls built by Justinian fortified only the three major hills of the city, whilst repairs to these walls dated to the seventh century were found to reuse a large number of artefacts from earlier Roman buildings, including columns, capitals and friezes.³⁵¹ An inner fortress was also constructed covering the central acropolis, and one of its gates, near the church of SS Constantine and Helena, still stands today (see Figures 11 & 12).

³⁴⁷ Obolensky, 'The Balkans in the ninth century: barrier or bridge?' p. 53-4.

³⁴⁸ Whittow, *The making of Byzantium*, p. 267.

³⁴⁹ M. Wendel, 'Die Ausgrabungen in *Iatrus* and *Karasura*', in J. Henning ed., *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium, Vol. 2: Byzantium, Pliska and the Balkans* (Berlin, 2007). These sites will be discussed further below in Chapter 11.

³⁵⁰ Naissus and Serdica will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 11.

³⁵¹ R. T. Ivanov ed., *Tabula Imperii Romani, K35/2 Philippopolis* (Sofia, 2012), p. 65-6.



Figure 11: Remains of the inner fortress gate around the central acropolis.



Figure 12: Plan of the fortifications of Philippopolis, showing the wall built by Justinian in the sixth century, and the walls around the central acropolis. From Hodinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity*, p. 189.

It is difficult to determine if the city survived the Avar and Slavic incursions of the seventh and eighth centuries intact, as numismatic evidence suggests many nearby fortresses in the Maritsa Valley were destroyed during this period.³⁵² It's likely that owing to these incessant raids, and a dwindling population, during this period the city shrank in size even further to occupy only the area enclosed by the inner fortress, around the central acropolis itself.³⁵³ When Anna Comnena later visited the city in the early twelfth century, she noted that remains of the hippodrome and other ancient buildings could then only barely be seen, suggesting they had long been abandoned and likely used instead as quarries for building material.³⁵⁴

In 811, after Emperor Nicephorus was caught in an ambush by the Bulgar Khan Krum in the Varbitsa Pass to the north-east of the city, its population is said to have abandoned it in panic.³⁵⁵ It is not clear if the city was captured by Khan Krum at this point although both Philippopolis and the even more exposed Serdica may have been left deliberately undefended for some time afterwards.³⁵⁶ Definitive evidence of either city's inhabitation during this period is so scarce it is difficult to determine whether this was indeed the case, although it is argued that Philippopolis possibly remained abandoned for a time during the ninth century in accordance with the treaty agreed between Leo V and Krum's successor, Khan Omurtag.³⁵⁷

This is, however, potentially at odds with the account provided by an inscription known as the 'Stone annals of the ruler Malamir.' Khan Malamir, who succeeded Omurtag, renewed hostilities with the Byzantines in 836 and invaded Thrace. Here, according to the inscription, *'The ruler Malamir, who reigned together with the kavhan Isbul, took the field against the Greeks with his army and devastated the fortress of Provat, the fortress Burdizo, and the lands of the Greeks. Covered with glory he came to Philippopolis and the Greeks fled. Kavhan Isbul, together with the glorious ruler conducted negotiations with the citizens of Philippopolis.'*³⁵⁸ Clearly some inhabitants had remained in the city, and afterwards it is suggested that Khan Malamir may have subsequently led some of these off into captivity.³⁵⁹

³⁵² Yurukova, 'Byzantine Fortresses to the south of the Hemus Mountain in the light of coin finds from the last decades of the sixth century', p. 96.

³⁵³ Hoddinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity*, p. 291.

³⁵⁴ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 463.

³⁵⁵ Theophanes, *Chronicle*, p. 175.

³⁵⁶ Obolensky, 'Byzantine Frontier Zones and Cultural Exchanges', p. 304.

³⁵⁷ J. B. Bury, 'The Bulgarian Treaty of A. D. 814, and the Great Fence of Thrace', *The English Historical Review*, 25, no. 98 (Apr., 1910), p. 281-2. Also see R. Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria: a comparative study across the early medieval frontier* (London, 1975), p. 50-1.

³⁵⁸ K. Petkov, *The voices of medieval Bulgaria, seventh-fifteenth century: the records of a bygone culture* (Leiden, 2008), p. 12.

³⁵⁹ Browning, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, p. 99.

Whatever the fate of its inhabitants during the ninth century, it must have been repopulated again the following century, ahead of its sack by the Kievan Rus. In 969 the Byzantine emperor, John Tzimiskes, recaptured the city and shortly afterwards, in 971, the Kievan Prince Svjatoslav I invaded the Balkans. He placed the city under siege and, according to Leo the Deacon, after its capture had its twenty thousand inhabitants impaled.³⁶⁰ Whilst this number is almost certainly an exaggeration, it does suggest that even at this point in its history the city was a relatively well populated one. Tzimiskes soon recaptured the city and in order to re-populate it once more, in a fateful step resettled a large number of Paulicians in the region.³⁶¹

In this instance it was probably hoped that the militant Paulicians, removed from their homelands in eastern Asia Minor, might help in the defence of the city, and eventually be absorbed into the local population. In this respect John Tzimiskes was to be disappointed, as the Paulicians proved to be a divisive element in the history of the city from this point onwards, and would later come to be joined by another ethnic group, émigré Armenians who migrated westwards after the annexation of the sub-kingdoms of Armenia by Basil II.³⁶² Anna Comnena, who visited the city in 1114 with her father, Emperor Alexius Comnenus, described the city thusly:

*'Practically all the inhabitants of Philippopolis were in fact Manichaeans, so that they lorded it over the Christians there and plundered their goods, paying little or no attention to the emperor's envoys. Their numbers increased until all the people around the city were of their persuasion. They were joined by a new flood of immigrants. These newcomers were Armenians – a brackish stream – and they were succeeded by others from the foulest springs of James. Philippopolis was a meeting place, so to speak, of all polluted waters.'*³⁶³

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Paulicians were associated with a number of large revolts in the region. In the late eleventh century a prominent member of Philippopolis' Paulician community, Lecus, incited a rebellion that originated near Serdica and subsequently spread to Naissus.³⁶⁴ This uprising suggests that Paulicians were making use of the *Via Militaris* to spread word of the revolt, and that the road itself may have facilitated the expansion of the heresy to further cities along its length. In response to this, and his concerns over the faithfulness of Paulician soldiers after the Battle of Dyrrhachium in 1081, Alexius attempted to break up the heretical population of the city

³⁶⁰ Leo the Deacon, *Historia*, trans. A-M. Talbot & D. Sullivan, *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine military expansion in the tenth century* (Washington D.C., 2005), p. 155.

³⁶¹ John Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, trans. J. Whortley, *A synopsis of Byzantine history, 811-1057* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 273-4.

³⁶² P. Charanis, 'The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire', *Byzantinoslavica*, 22 (1961), p. 237.

³⁶³ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 385.

³⁶⁴ D. Obolensky, *The Bogomils: a study in Balkan neo-manichaeism* (Middlesex, 1972), p. 189-90.

by subjecting its leaders to a series of show trials staged in Constantinople. Obolensky argues that Alexius adopted this approach because he feared he was too weak, on account of the devastating losses suffered at Dyrrhachium, to confront the Paulicians directly in Philippopolis, suggesting the sect, as Anna Comnena implies, had indeed become a law unto themselves in the city.³⁶⁵

This approach evidently proved unsuccessful however, as indicated by the subsequent revolt of the Paulician leader Traulos, in 1084. Further, correspondence between its mid-twelfth century bishop, Michael Italikos, and his friend in Constantinople, Theodore Prodromus, indicates that a sizeable heretical community remained in the city. Although Italikos' original letter is lost, Prodromus, in reply, stated that, '*I am sure you will be able, with the Patriarch's help, to deal with the heresies so rife in your diocese, and by argument bring the heretics back to the fold of Orthodoxy.*'³⁶⁶ It seems highly likely that Italikos had been specifically charged with leading the city back into the fold of orthodoxy, and a seal of his office bore the poignant inscription, '*City of Philipp, nurtured by the apostles, you have me as your nurse.*'³⁶⁷

During the passage of the Third Crusade the city's governor, Nicetas Choniates, remarked that the only inhabitants who remained to meet the crusaders were the poor, those '*whose entire substance was reckoned in the clothing he wore*', and that besides its Armenian population, the rest abandoned the city to the crusaders.³⁶⁸ These Armenians greeted the crusaders as friends, since, in Choniates' words, '*they agreed in each other's heresies*'.³⁶⁹ On the crusader side we have the testimony of *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, which states that '*The Armenians are our loyal subjects*',³⁷⁰ whilst the *Historia de Expeditione* explained that local Armenian and Bulgarian communities had agreed to supply the crusaders with provisions in return for protection.³⁷¹ Geoffrey of Villehardouin likewise mentions '*the great part of the people, who were Paulicians*' who offered to surrender the city to the Bulgar Khan Kaloyan in 1205.³⁷²

Although the number of Paulicians residing in the city was almost certainly exaggerated in contemporary sources, in particular by Anna Comnena, they no doubt constituted a sizeable

³⁶⁵ Obolensky, *The Bogomils*, p. 191.

³⁶⁶ R. Browning, 'Unpublished correspondence between Michael Italikos, Archbishop of Philippopolis, and Theodore Prodromos', *Byzantinobulgarica*, I (1962), p. 286.

³⁶⁷ See Item 68.2, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art, Vol. 1* p. 152. Whilst Philipp the Deacon was not an apostle, as the inscription claims, he was popularly believed by the Byzantines to have been.

³⁶⁸ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 222.

³⁶⁹ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 222.

³⁷⁰ Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, p. 152.

³⁷¹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 74-5.

³⁷² Geoffrey of Villehardouin, *De la Conquête de Constantinople*, trans. M. R. B. Shaw, *The conquest of Constantinople in Chronicles of the Crusades, Joinville and Villehardouin* (Middlesex, 1963), p. 105.

proportion of its population in the Middle Ages. This suggests that the overall population of the city, especially after its sack by the Kievan Rus in 971, was probably quite small. Nevertheless, Philippopolis remained a major city by Balkan standards, and during the crusading period was not only able to offer market facilities to crusader forces, but accommodate for a time the entirety of Barbarossa's contingent of the Third Crusade.

So whilst it is difficult to differentiate between its Armenian and Paulician communities, which Byzantine sources mostly refer to as 'Manichean', it is clear that despite Byzantine efforts to quash the heresy, these communities remained a readily recognisable, and divisive, element of Philippopolis' population throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Indeed the remarkable persistence of this community is emphasised by Lady Montagu who, passing through the city in 1716, noted the continuing existence of 'a sect of Christians that call themselves Paulines.'³⁷³ The capacity of the Paulicians to defy Byzantine authority, as well as their ability to seemingly spread their faith to further cities along the route of the *Via Militaris*, argues, at the very least, for the development of lively and largely self-sufficient urban communities in the medieval Balkans.

In comparison to Philippopolis, Adrianople, and the cities of Thrace, appear to have weathered the turmoil of the sixth and seventh centuries relatively well, although Adrianople itself was sacked by Khan Krum in 813, who then retreated, leading away '12,000' captives, who were subsequently settled along the Danube.³⁷⁴ Nevertheless the cities of this region, and Adrianople in particular, seem to have benefitted greatly from the upheavals of the period, as their populations were swelled through an influx of refugees from elsewhere in the Balkans, and they accordingly emerged as far more important administrative and ecclesiastical centres than they had been previously during the late Roman period.

Indeed a number of formerly obscure stations, such as Arcadiopolis and Bulgarophygon, as a consequence of their position astride the *Via Militaris*, their agricultural production, and their fortifications, emerged as notable regional centres. Owing to the importance of this region for provisioning the capital, from the late sixth century onwards the Byzantines regularly transferred populations from its eastern provinces and resettled them in Thrace, further swelling the populations of these urban centres.³⁷⁵ Their subsequent growth and increased prominence therefore challenges the conception that the seventh and eighth century was exclusively a period of decline and devastation in the Byzantine Balkans.

³⁷³ Lady M. W. Montagu, *The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 159.

³⁷⁴ Leo Grammaticus, *Chronographia*, D. Kosev & H. Hristov eds., *Documents and materials on the history of the Bulgarian people* (Sofia, 1969), p. 13-4.

³⁷⁵ P. Charanis, 'The transfer of population as a policy in the Byzantine Empire', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 3, no. 2 (Jan, 1961), p. 142-4.

So whilst the literary and archaeological records remain mixed, scattered evidence indicates the retention of at least some urban populations within the Central Balkans. This still does not, however, give any insight into the actual conditions that prevailed within these settlements. As Haldon points out, the survival of urban sites does not tell us anything of the economic and social relations that developed from the seventh century onwards, only that they offered more protection than life in the surrounding countryside, and that they likely continued to function as administrative and ecclesiastical centres, as is to be expected.³⁷⁶ As Curta likewise states, it is almost impossible, using the available evidence, to differentiate between smaller towns and larger cities in the medieval Balkans, and the inability to do so impacts upon our ability to trace economic and social developments over this period.³⁷⁷

Angold argues that it therefore is not the decline of provincial cities during the sixth and seventh centuries that requires the most explanation, but rather their subsequent slow recovery.³⁷⁸ Geographical proximity, or conversely isolation, to Constantinople unsurprisingly appears to have played a leading role in determining the fate of many urban settlements in this period. Yet other possible factors, such as climate, were likely highly influential. One factor in particular that has of yet received little consideration is the long term impact of land degradation and erosion. Owing to its unique geography and distinctive weather patterns, in particular high summer rainfall and heavy spring snow melts, the Balkan region is highly susceptible to the impact of erosion in particular.³⁷⁹

In the Balkans this process typically results in the removal of soil from the mountain ranges and its deposition along the river valleys, which is a major cause of the high fertility that they have historically displayed and retain to this very day. However it also has other unwanted side effects, one of which is the creation of marshes that are highly susceptible to infestations of mosquitoes carrying malaria. Human activity can also dramatically increase both the scope and severity of erosion. Historically, overpopulation and overexploitation of the landscape has been the catalyst for catastrophic erosion events that can lead to cultural and demographic collapse.³⁸⁰ The influence of such processes in the Balkans are only poorly understood, and while endemic war, plague and political instability are the

³⁷⁶ J. Haldon, 'Some considerations on the Byzantine society and economy in the seventh century', *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 10 (1995), p. 85.

³⁷⁷ Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250*, p. 430.

³⁷⁸ M. Angold, 'The shaping of the medieval Byzantine 'city'', *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 10 (1985), p. 1.

³⁷⁹ For a deeper discussion of these processes see B. Geyer, 'Physical factors in the evolution of the landscape and land use', in A. E. Laiou ed., *The Economic History of Byzantium: from the seventh through to the fifteenth century*, Vol. 1 (Washington D.C., 2002), p. 36-7. Also see Hordell & Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, p. 312-328, for a discussion of these processes within the wider Mediterranean context.

³⁸⁰ J. Bintliff, 'Erosion in the Mediterranean lands: a reconsideration of pattern, process and methodology', in M. Bell & J. Boardman eds., *Past and present soil erosion: archaeological and geographical perspectives* (Oxford, 1992), p. 126.

more obvious causes for dramatic population declines in the region, the delayed period of population recovery may have been in part owing to the environmental impact of the intensive agricultural practices of the late Roman period.

Malaria may therefore have been a serious concern on some stretches of the *Via Militaris*, in particular along the Maritsa Valley and in Thrace owing to their warmer climates. In the Ottoman period this region was infamous for the disease, with the marshy banks of the Maritsa especially providing fertile breeding grounds for mosquitos, something which the introduction of rice crops to the region only exacerbated. Early Modern travellers spoke of this area in fearful tones, particularly during the summer and autumn months when '*places became almost uninhabitable from fever.*'³⁸¹ Elsewhere there are descriptions of the '*sultry and feverish Thracian plain*'³⁸² and that '*the plain reeks vapourish in the summer.*'³⁸³ Malaria has long been associated with miasmas, or 'bad air'.³⁸⁴ Accordingly, travellers who were forced to cross this region preferred to do so on horseback and as quickly as possible, and avoided staying in the poor local inns along the route, whilst during the First World War the malarial marshes of the region brought Allied armies to almost a complete standstill.³⁸⁵

Whether malaria was an issue during the medieval period is difficult to determine from the sources alone. *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg* describes how participants of the Third Crusade suffered from tertian and quartan fever on their journey.³⁸⁶ These afflictions, where symptoms including fever, sweating and shaking, occur every three to four days are usually associated with the early onset of malaria. Hendy argues that whilst there is no direct evidence to support his hypothesis, general evidence suggests that Justinian and Anastasius were the last Byzantine emperors possessed of the resources required to undertake the extensive civil projects necessary to drain these regions and allow their full agricultural exploitation.³⁸⁷ Subsequently allowing marsh land to remain would have exacerbated the susceptibility of these regions to malaria, whilst also reducing available arable land.

Land degradation and subsequent malarial infestations, therefore, may offer a partial explanation for the slow pace of recovery experienced by cities such as Serdica. Though fertile, much of the land in the Sofia plain in particular is quite marshy, whereas the city itself sits upon a diluvial terrace. The

³⁸¹ Mackenzie & Irby, *Travels in the Slavonic provinces of Turkey-in-Europe*, p. 136.

³⁸² Mackenzie & Irby, *Travels in the Slavonic provinces of Turkey-in-Europe*, p. 140.

³⁸³ J. F. Fraser, *Pictures from the Balkans* (London, 1912), p. 100.

³⁸⁴ R. Neghina, A. Neghina, I. Marincu, & I. Iacobiciu, 'Malaria, a Journey in Time: In Search of the Lost Myths and Forgotten Stories', *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 340, no. 6 (December, 2010), p. 493.

³⁸⁵ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Greece Vol. 1 Physical geography, History, Administration & Peoples*. (Cambridge, 1944), p. 272-6.

³⁸⁶ Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, p. 149-50.

³⁸⁷ Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300-1450*, p. 67-8.

difficulties arising from land reclamation may therefore offer one explanation as to why the city of Serdica in particular declined in prominence from the late Roman period onwards. As the population declined as a consequence of the devastation it suffered at the hands of barbaric incursions from the third century onwards, this impacted upon its ability to reclaim and exploit nearby land, which in turn increased the regions susceptibility to outbreaks of malaria.

It is also possible that this situation was exacerbated by, or even contributed to, a general agricultural backwardness. Gregory of Antiochos, a Byzantine official, was appalled at the wretchedness of this region in the 1170s, and complained bitterly about the standards of local agriculture, and in particular that in the vicinity of Serdica it was possible to only reap one harvest a year.³⁸⁸ Local farmers may have practiced 'itinerant farming', where each patch of land was farmed until it lost its fertility after repeated cultivation without manuring, then abandoned. This could potentially explain the abject poverty that greeted the Third Crusade. On the whole, however, a lack of research, especially in regards to pollen analysis or archaeological study of fields, makes it difficult to trace agricultural developments in any great detail, and in particular how they may have varied from region to region in the medieval Balkans.³⁸⁹

Climate also likely played a significant factor in population growth and decay. As noted above, weather conditions between modern Sofia and Plovdiv are noticeably different (see Figures 13 & 14). The Maritsa Valley, with its more Mediterranean style climate and the absence of damaging spring frosts, is far better suited to agricultural activity than the more exposed regions surrounding Sofia. In particular, grape vines and olives are grown in abundance in the Maritsa Valley, and Philippopolis has therefore, with its ample supply of wine and olive oil, historically been considered as the limit of 'civilised' Greek settlement in the Balkans, as opposed to the 'Slavic' settlement of Serdica, whose inhabitants, instead of olive oil, had to make do with butter.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁸ J. Darrouzès, 'Deux lettres de Grégoire Antiochos Écrites de Bulgarie vers 1173', *Byzantinoslavica*, 23 (1962), p. 279.

³⁸⁹ Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250*, p. 419-20. For theoretical approaches to this issue see J. Koder, 'Land use and settlement: theoretical approaches', in J. Haldon ed., *General Issues in the Study of Medieval Logistics: sources, problems and methodologies* (Boston, 2006).

³⁹⁰ The Gates of Trajan are also often taken to represent the line of demarcation between the 'Greek' and 'Latin' halves of the Balkan Peninsula, Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, p. 37.

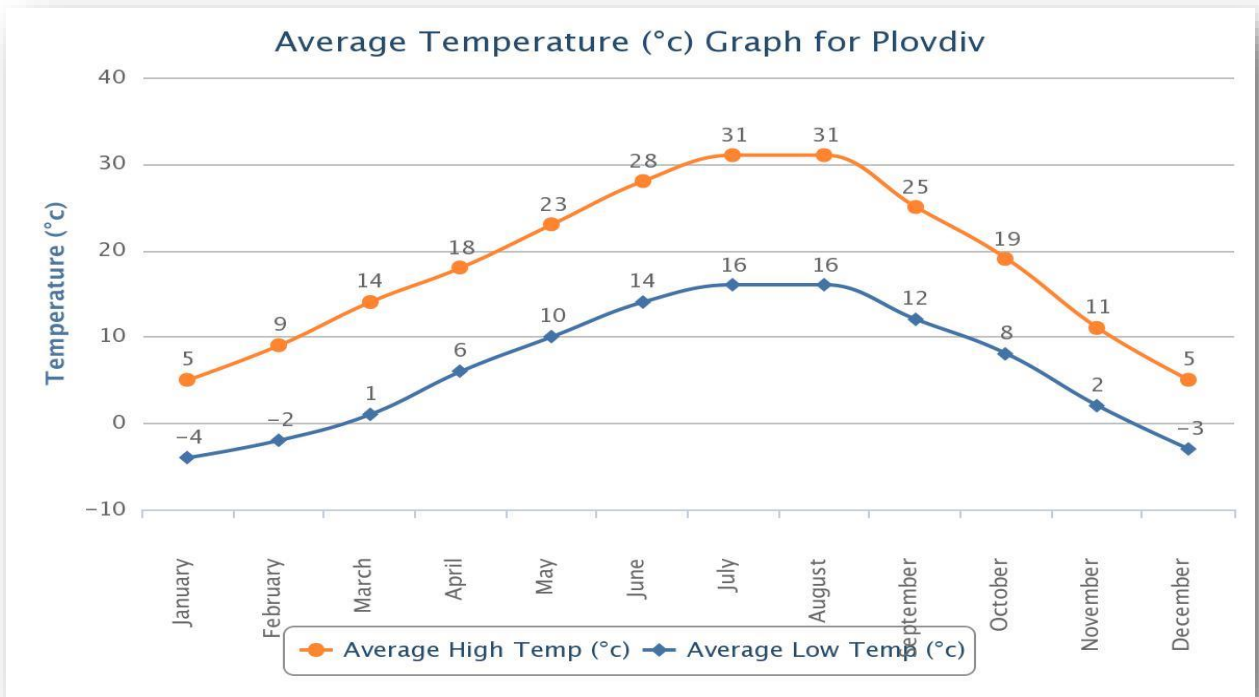
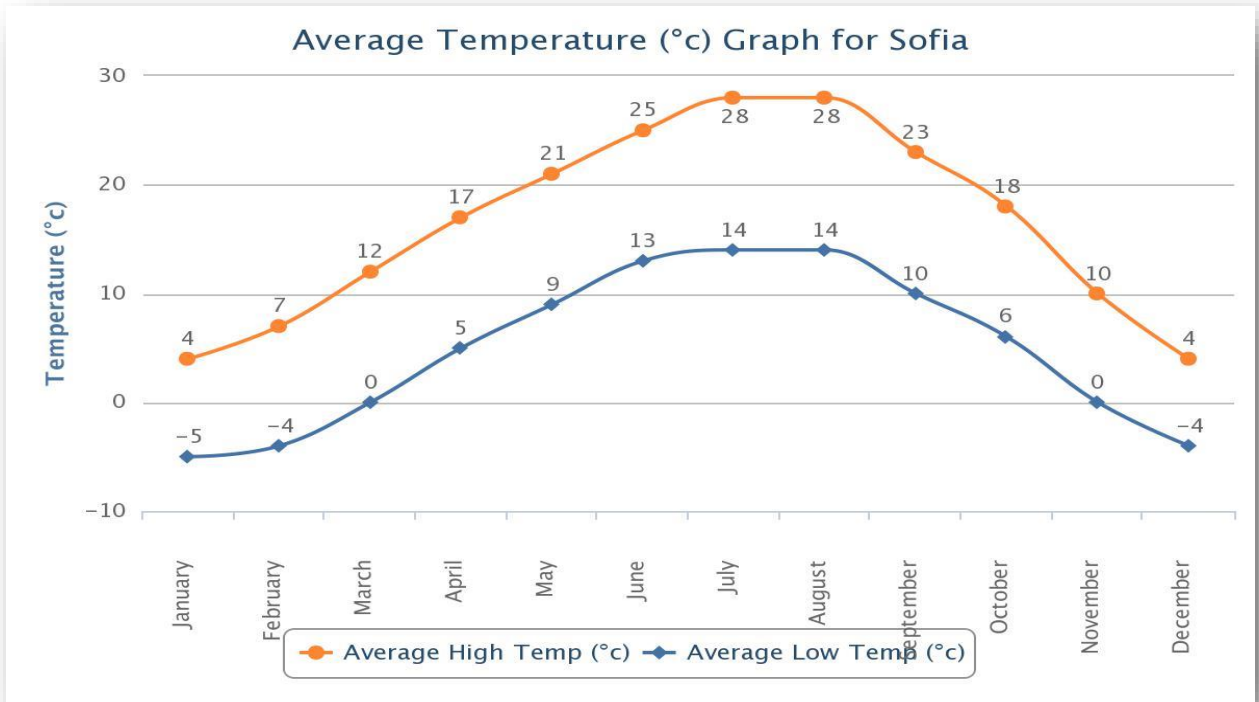


Figure 13: Comparison of monthly temperature means between Sofia and Plovdiv. Data is collected from 2000-2012.

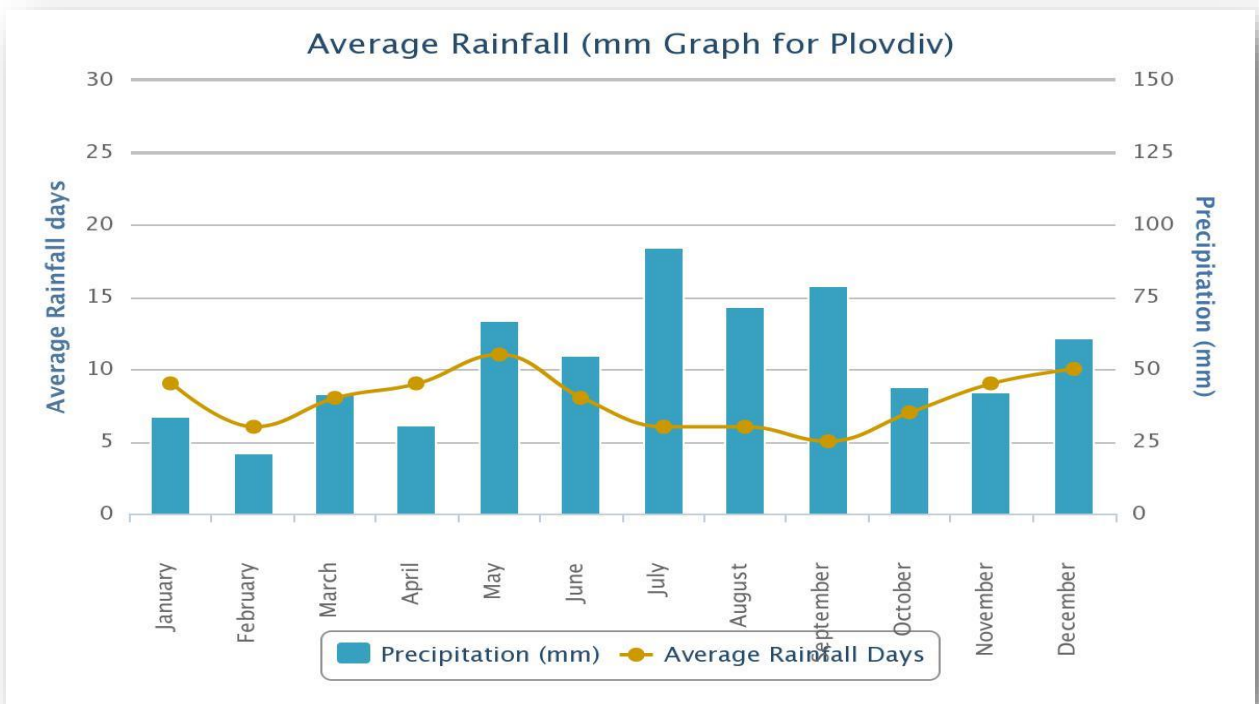
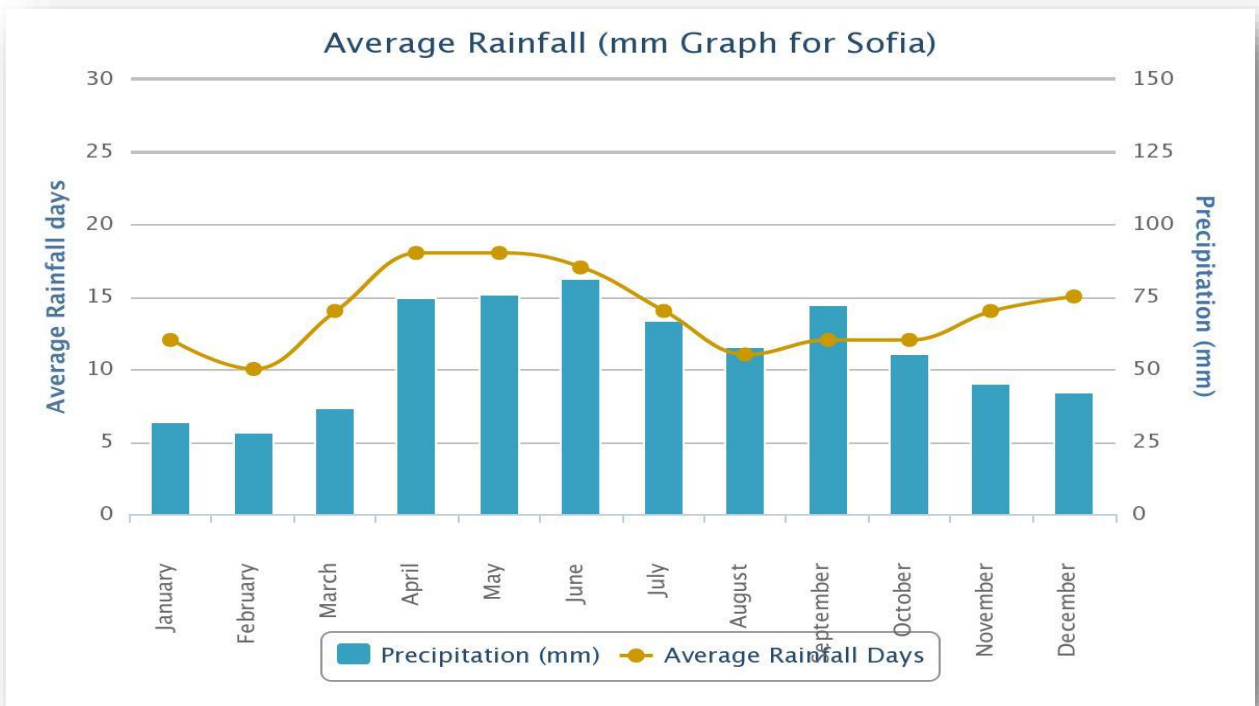


Figure 14: Comparison of monthly average rainfall between Sofia and Plovdiv. Data is collected from 2000-2012.

The impact of climate change in the Balkans has also been little explored, and it is tempting to correlate the generally milder period between the ninth and twelfth centuries with the economic expansion so evident during this period.³⁹¹ However, as Barber notes, this temptation should be resisted for there are other, non-climatic reasons for this expansion, in particular increasing political stability, and the data simply does not yet exist which could make any such link convincing.³⁹² So whilst climate change may appear to offer a convincing explanation for population growth and decay from the sixth to the twelfth centuries, it is likely the very fragility of those environments which were populated was the most decisive factor involved, and this, as Geyer argues, is a history that is still yet to be written.³⁹³

That any cities in the Balkan hinterland were able to survive the upheavals of the seventh century at all, however, was surely due to the fact that, in direct contrast with the situation then prevailing throughout much of Western Europe, Byzantium still possessed a major urban settlement that could exert a strong gravitational influence over the surrounding region. With the economic environment created by the Romans destroyed, a city's survival was subsequently dependent on its place within an organisational system that centred upon the massive urban metropolis of Constantinople, and those that had no place within this new dispensation simply withered away.³⁹⁴ Cities, in effect, lost their independent economic and institutional identities, and instead existed purely as distant functionaries of administrative organs located within Constantinople.

Yet those cities that had a role to play within this system stood to do relatively well, and in particular the presence of military garrisons, with their regular wages, would have provided an important spur to local economic activity.³⁹⁵ These transactions can perhaps be traced through local numismatic records, or more accurately the lack thereof. Whilst the golden coinage of the period is not unknown in this region, copper coins are much rarer. This suggests that most commercial interactions occurred with the state, which insisted upon taxes being paid in gold, and local transactions that required smaller denominations were relatively lacking.³⁹⁶

³⁹¹ Geyer, 'Physical factors in the evolution of the landscape and land use', p. 41-4.

³⁹² M. Barber, *The Two Cities; medieval Europe 1050-1320* (New York, 1992), p. 17.

³⁹³ Geyer, 'Physical factors in the evolution of the landscape and land use', p. 44.

³⁹⁴ Angold, 'The shaping of the medieval Byzantine 'city'', p. 351.

³⁹⁵ On the wages of salaried troops in provincial or thematic forces see Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 120-3.

³⁹⁶ Whittow, *The making of Byzantium*, p. 59-61. Although the dangers involved in interpreting numismatic evidence in this manner are noted by J. Haldon, 'Commerce and exchange in the seventh and eighth centuries; regional trade and the movement of goods', in C. Morrisson ed., *Trade and Markets in Byzantium* (Washington D.C., 2012), p. 108-12.

In particular the task of feeding the teeming masses of Constantinople, especially after the loss of the empire's Egyptian provinces, must have been a daunting one, yet it has been convincingly argued that this was accomplished through the surplus grain production of Thrace and the regions around the Aegean Sea.³⁹⁷ Thrace also provided a large proportion of the fruit and vegetables required by the capital, and Attaleiates describes how the pillage of this region by Pechenegs in the mid-eleventh century, when '*summer was beginning and the fruit was still hanging unpicked from the trees*' caused '*no small shortage of food in the Reigning City and the other western cities*', which ultimately led to widespread famine and civil unrest.³⁹⁸

Even though the population of the capital in the seventh century, and into the eighth, appears to have been much reduced from its late Roman height, it still likely needed large quantities of imported foodstuffs to adequately sustain itself. From the late eighth century onwards its population started to increase once more, and these demands only subsequently grew, so much so that in the mid-twelfth century Michael Choniates, in a famous passage, related how '*all the rivers of goods run towards the imperial city, as if to the sea.*'³⁹⁹ Much of this produce was transported to Constantinople by sea, but it still needed to reach the ports, and provincial cities must have played an important role in overseeing the logistical networks necessary to ensure a steady supply of foodstuffs flowed towards the capital, as well as providing the necessary local security.

Local trade would also have played an important, if largely unrecognised, role in facilitating agricultural exchange in provincial communities but would not, by itself, have provided the impetus required to maintain decaying logistical networks nor supply a metropolis like Constantinople. This was only possible through the administrative direction provided by bureaucratic bodies located in the capital. Given the critical importance of keeping the population of Constantinople well fed, it is certain that Byzantine emperors took a keen interest in the maintenance of a stable supply of goods to the capital from nearby provinces. That local transport networks were being kept in at least a moderately good state of repair, enough to accommodate wagons at least, is suggested by the large numbers of ox-carts Manuel Comnenus requisitioned from Thracian farmers for his campaign of 1160.⁴⁰⁰

The city of Raidestos, for instance, which is located along the route of the *Via Egnatia*, was evidently a major port for the transport of Thracian grain to Constantinople, and became the site of a *phoundax*, or state corn exchange, for a period during the reign of Michael VII. Michael Attaleiates provides a

³⁹⁷ Teall, 'The grain supply of Byzantine Empire, 330-1025', p. 87-139.

³⁹⁸ Attaleiates, *The History*, p. 379.

³⁹⁹ Michael Choniates, trans. S. Lambros, *Michael Akominatou tou Choniates ta Sozomena*, Vol. 2 (Groningen, 1968), p. 83.

⁴⁰⁰ John Kinnamos, *The Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus*, trans. C.M. Brand (New York, 1976), p. 151.

description of how carts were used to bring grain to the *kastron* of Raidestos for sale, and how, until the *phoundax* was constructed, a thriving local market economy existed in the region.⁴⁰¹ Magdalino surmises that these vendors were *paroikoi* who worked the great estates of Thrace, and in particular the imperial domains (*episkepsis*) that lay along the *Via Militaris* as far as Adrianople, and were selling their produce in order to pay their rents or taxes.⁴⁰² Lemerle also argues for the persistence of ‘great properties’ in Thrace beyond the seventh century that were worked by dependent cultivators.⁴⁰³ Much of this produce was likely ported down river systems such as the Maritsa, but local road networks would have played an equally important role in allowing the system to operate smoothly.

Similarly, provincial cities played an important role as bulwarks protecting the approaches to the vital agricultural lands of Thrace, and the capital beyond.⁴⁰⁴ That the Byzantines were aware of this need can be deduced from attempts by successive emperors during the tenth and eleventh centuries to transfer populations to Thrace and along the Nishava River, which had been the subject of extensive devastation from the late sixth century onwards. In either 688 or 689, Emperor Justinian II settled large numbers of ‘Scythians’ along the previously devastated Struma River, which indicates Byzantium still had an interest in maintaining the strategically important route between Thessalonica and Serdica, even if the archaeological evidence indicates that this measure must have failed.⁴⁰⁵ Philippopolis, as seen above, was also repopulated in the tenth century, and played an important role in protecting the Thracian hinterland. Whilst it retained the defensive fortifications constructed by Justinian, it clearly was not an impregnable fortress, and was sacked by the Kievan Rus in 971, and furthermore abandoned by its citizens both during the depredations of Khan Krum in the early ninth century, and ahead of the passage of the Third Crusade during the late twelfth.

Instead Philippopolis’ importance was related to its ability to act as a military staging post. Well supplied by the agricultural production of the Maritsa Valley, it was conveniently positioned to act as a base to conduct operations either to the west through the Succ Pass, or north to the passes through the Central Balkan Mountains. Philippopolis, therefore, functioned as a forward supply base, and seals of *horreiaroi*, which indicate the presence of warehouses that stored grain from imperial estates, have

⁴⁰¹ Attaleiates, *The History*, p. 367-9.

⁴⁰² P. Magdalino, ‘The grain supply of Constantinople, ninth-twelfth centuries’, in C. Mango & G. Dagron eds., *Constantinople and Its Hinterland: Papers from the Twenty-seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Oxford, April 1993* (Oxford, 1995), p. 40-1.

⁴⁰³ P. Lemerle, *The Agrarian history of Byzantium from the origins to the twelfth century: the sources and problems* (Galway, 1979), p. 65.

⁴⁰⁴ For a deeper discussion of this region during this period see K. Gagova, ‘Bulgarian-Byzantine border in Thrace from the 7th to the 10th century (Bulgaria to the south of the Haemus)’, *Bulgarian Historical Review*, 14 (1986).

⁴⁰⁵ Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250*, p. 98.

been found in the city.⁴⁰⁶ Successive emperors, from the late tenth century onwards, would use Philippopolis as a staging post from which campaigns further afield in the Balkans were prosecuted, such as Basil's against Serdica in 986, or Alexius Comnenus' against the Pecheneg incursions through the passes of the Central Balkan Mountains in the late eleventh century. In the late twelfth century Isaac Angelos installed his cousin, Constantine Angelos Doukas, in the city in order to check Vlach raids into the Maritsa Valley, a role in which the young general, for a time, experienced a great deal of success.⁴⁰⁷ In this regard Philippopolis serves as an example of the other benefit of defensive fortifications, in that they functioned not only as a means of providing sanctuary to local populations, but also as a point from which to attack and establish control over the surrounding region. The similarly well defended cities of Thrace would have likewise fulfilled these dual roles.⁴⁰⁸

The argument that all urban settlement in the Central Balkans was destroyed in this period, their populations fleeing to the security of the coastal ports, is one that has therefore been steadily losing sway, as archaeological and numismatic evidence is increasingly being utilised in conjunction with existing literary sources. A more nuanced scenario has come to be discussed, one that argues for the continuing existence of at least some urban settlements, but on a far different basis to that which had predominated in the late Roman period. Haldon succinctly summarises these arguments by pointing out that Byzantine cities were necessary different from their classical antecedents, in that they performed very different roles.⁴⁰⁹ In this sense it is true that the cities of the classical period were destroyed, for as the cities lost their economic independence, their classical identities likewise vanished. In their stead arose medieval communities of a far different nature.

So whilst we can learn little of their size, or indeed their ethnic composition, some urban settlements at least remained in the Balkan Peninsula after the seventh century, especially in those regions closest to the imperial capital. Perhaps it was the case that the well-fortified cities of the Balkan interior were able to come to an accommodation with the Slavic communities that settled in the mountainous regions around them. The second book of miracles of St Demetrius tells of a Slavic King named Perboundus who, whilst living in the city of Thessalonica, was placed under arrest by the emperor, prompting a joint Greek and Slavic embassy to travel to Constantinople to plead for his release.⁴¹⁰ John Kaminiates likewise describes how, in the late ninth, early tenth, century, Byzantine settlements near Thessalonica paid taxes to nearby 'Skythians', and that trade and relations between the two groups

⁴⁰⁶ Laiou, 'Regional networks in the Balkans in the Middle and Late Byzantine Periods', p. 129.

⁴⁰⁷ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 239.

⁴⁰⁸ On the dual role of the medieval castle, as a place both for defence and offence, see J. France, *Western warfare in the age of the Crusades, 1000-1300* (Ithaca, 1999), p. 77-8.

⁴⁰⁹ Haldon, *Byzantium in the seventh century*, p. 94.

⁴¹⁰ Abrahamse, *Hagiographic sources for Byzantine cities, 500-900 A.D.*, p. 79.

were often cordial and mutually beneficial.⁴¹¹ Given that there was little cause for conflict between the Slavic tribes that predominately occupied relatively isolated forested and mountainous terrain, and the urban settlements of the valleys and plains, the process of urban decline in the Balkans was gradual, uneven and it is clear that in several cases it was never completed.⁴¹²

For all of this, however, owing to the upheavals of the seventh century, Byzantine authority was, at the least, heavily compromised along large sections of the *Via Militaris*. Thrace and the Maritsa Valley may have remained at least partially within the bounds of effective Byzantine control, and therefore retained relatively significant urban settlements, but beyond the Sredna Gora and the Gates of Trajan it must be assumed that any such authority was ephemeral at best. Certainly in these regions the conditions necessary for the establishment of stable administrative structures were lacking, and this would have been reflected in the surface of the road itself, which likely was rendered impassable in parts owing to the ravages of time and neglect. In this period, therefore, the prominence of the *Via Militaris* as an overland route to Constantinople naturally declined, with travellers instead making the journey by sea, in particular via the trunk routes that connected Italy with southern Greece and were further extended to the Byzantine capital itself.⁴¹³ What little information that can be gleaned from the itineraries of eighth and ninth century ambassadors to Constantinople would suggest that the *Via Militaris* was avoided in preference of coastal routes, the overland route via the Danube, or even the *Via Egnatia*.⁴¹⁴

It is not until the mid-eleventh century, after this region between the Danube River and Serdica was reabsorbed into the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Basil II, that we see travellers, in particular pilgrims, once more making the overland journey to the capital along the *Via Militaris*. Whilst other factors, including the restoration of the Holy Sepulchre and the normalisation of relations between Byzantium and the Fatimid Caliphate were also highly influential, the political stabilisation of the Central Balkans under Byzantine governance was likely the catalyst that reopened this route to Western pilgrims.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹¹ John Kaminiates, *De excidio Thessalonicensi*, D. Kosev & H. Hristov eds., *Documents and materials on the history of the Bulgarian people* (Sofia, 1969), p. 12.

⁴¹² J. D. Howard-Johnston, 'Urban continuity in the Balkans in the Early Middle Ages', in A. G. Poulter ed., *Ancient Bulgaria: papers presented to the International Symposium on the Ancient History and Archaeology of Bulgaria*, Vol. 2 (Nottingham, 1981), p. 243.

⁴¹³ Pryor, *Geography, technology and war*, p. 93-111.

⁴¹⁴ McCormick, *Origins of European Economy: communications and commerce, A.D. 300-900*, p. 138-150.

⁴¹⁵ D. Jacoby, 'Bishop Gunther of Bamberg, Byzantium and Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the Eleventh Century', in L. H. Hoffman ed., *Zwischen Polis, Provinz und Peripherie. Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Kultur* (Wiesbaden, 2005), p. 268-74.

The hypothesis that the conquest of the Balkans by Basil II resurrected the *Via Militaris* finds support not only in the volume of recorded pilgrim traffic of the mid-eleventh century onwards, but also in the administrative reforms enacted by Basil himself. Holmes argues that in the late tenth century, Basil initially sought to arrange purely for the defence of the Balkan provinces in order to free his hand for more pressing issues that required his intervention in the East, not the least being the Anatolian rebellions of Bardas Skleros and Bardas Phocas, and a lightning campaign undertaken against the Fatamid invasion of Aleppo in 995.⁴¹⁶ Accordingly, provincial governors, such as *Doux* Gregory Taronites at Thessalonica, and his successors in the post John Chaldos and Nicephorus Ouranos, as well as a *strategos*, Theodorokan, located at Philippopolis, were installed. These governors were, Skylitzes suggests, initially instructed to remain purely on the defensive and to impede any hostile ingress into the fertile Maritsa Valley and Thracian plain, while offensive campaigns initially appear only to have occurred when Basil II and the imperial field army at his command, was present.⁴¹⁷

During Basil's systematic reduction of the Bulgarian empire between 1001 and 1018, officers from the Byzantine field army were installed as garrison commanders in conquered fortresses, and the ecclesiastical administration of the region was restored.⁴¹⁸ Far from the all-conquering warlord which later reputation would represent him as, Stephenson argues that Basil was most likely more concerned with the peaceful reabsorption of Bulgar lands into the empire than he was in waging a brutal war of extermination, and thus other than the control of strategic fortresses, local administration remained often in the hands of local nobility that had accepted Byzantine titles.⁴¹⁹ Indeed Holmes argues that whilst Skylitzes focuses on the martial achievements of Basil, his record also contains incidental references that indicate that Byzantine administration in the newly conquered regions was characterised by a considerable degree of flexibility and the involvement of local Bulgarians in both military and civil administration, perhaps best expressed in Basil's confirmation of the autocephalous status of the Bulgarian church in 1019/20.⁴²⁰

In particular, Basil's decree that in these newly conquered territories taxes could continue to be paid in kind was no doubt aimed at fostering the smooth transition of these regions to Byzantine rule. These frontier regions, where new cultures were being actively integrated into the empire, were particularly susceptible to not only internal disaffection, but external manipulation by neighbouring

⁴¹⁶ Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire, 976-1025*, p. 406-7.

⁴¹⁷ Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire, 976-1025*, p. 407-9.

⁴¹⁸ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 63-4.

⁴¹⁹ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 66-77. Whittow further argues that Skylitzes' description of Basil blinding '15,000' Bulgar prisoners in 1014 is pure fantasy, Whittow, *The making of Byzantium*, p. 388.

⁴²⁰ Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire, 976-1025*, p. 421.

states as well.⁴²¹ However, despite periodic episodes of unrest, on the whole these communities appear to have tolerated Byzantine rule relatively amicably. Although tensions were likely never far from the surface, and would ultimately explode into outright rebellion in 1185, archaeological evidence, in particular the number of new churches constructed, suggests that the eleventh and much of the twelfth centuries were relatively prosperous for the Balkans.⁴²²

Byzantine control over Bulgaria was established through the creation of new themes, primarily those of Bulgaria, Sirmium and Serbia. Some controversy concerns the date of the creation of a further theme, Paradunavon, owing to the absence of any seals related to the relevant office of *katepano*. The office of *katepano* is comparable with that of *doux*, in that it involved the command of a *tagmata*, a small unit of handpicked professional troops who were often used for garrison duties in reconquered regions.⁴²³ Madgearu notes that until the late eleventh century the commanders of older themes, such as Philippopolis or Naissus, continued to hold the title of *strategoï*, whilst provinces newly created under Basil II and his successors employed the use of either the title *doux* or *katepanoi*.⁴²⁴

The administrative establishments enacted by Basil II evolved under the patronage of subsequent regimes, with the ultimate aim of ensuring the stability of the Balkan region, and protecting it from external threats. Provincial borders were redrawn, and new ones, such as the aforementioned Paradunavon, were created. In particular a province of Serdica, which encompassed the river valleys between Naissus and Philippopolis, may have been created during the reign of Issac I Comnenus.⁴²⁵ It is notable that Basil, possibly in a continuation of the policy of John Tzimiskes, did not try and introduce a similar civilian or financial administration along the lower Danube, and this policy was largely followed by his successors.⁴²⁶ The frontier fortresses were instead held by local military elites who, in return for Byzantine titles, guarded the far flung borders of the empire. Stephenson dates the emergence of this same policy along the middle Danube from 1027, when the governor of the newly created province of Sirmium, Constantine Diogenes, was withdrawn and instead installed as *Doux* in Thessalonica, with responsibility for the governance of the province of Bulgaria.⁴²⁷

Between these frontier fortresses and the relatively richer river valleys and plains of the Balkan hinterland, Byzantium subsequently established a 'no man's land', a half open space where settlement

⁴²¹ A. Kazhdan & A. W. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 170.

⁴²² M. Mullett, *Theophylact of Ochrid: reading the letters of a Byzantine Archbishop* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 68.

⁴²³ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World*, p. 78.

⁴²⁴ A. Madgearu, *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10th-12th Centuries* (Leiden, 2013), p. 64.

⁴²⁵ Madgearu, *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10th-12th Centuries*, p. 77.

⁴²⁶ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 80-1.

⁴²⁷ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 124.

was forbidden in order to create a geographically foreboding buffer zone.⁴²⁸ Obolensky describes this arrangement not as a *limes*, the hard frontier border that the Romans had employed, but a *limen*, a threshold through which invading armies were required to traverse.⁴²⁹ This approach, the value of which the empire learnt through its experiences confronting Muslim razzias on its eastern frontiers, was notably enacted along the Moesian plain, between the lower Danube and the Central Balkan Mountain range, where the empty expanse of land behind the frontier offered an invading force little opportunity for looting or resupply.⁴³⁰ A similar frontier was also established along the empire's Serbian border, where it pointedly did not install garrisons beyond the Morava River, into Raška and Bosnia.⁴³¹

Aware that most barbaric incursions were of short duration, the Byzantines adopted a policy of 'doing nothing', refusing to give battle and denying their opponents the possibility of gaining military victories in the field.⁴³² These border zones, therefore, bought Byzantium time to react, whilst simultaneously robbing their opponents of the possibility of an early victory that might have swelled their numbers and turned a small raid into an outright invasion. All the while the absence of local settlements to pillage increased logistical pressure upon these invaders, and the lack of sources of dry fodder in particular would have been a pressing concern given the proportionally large number of mounted warriors participating in such raids.

Complementing this approach was the retention of fortresses placed along the frontier. The main purpose of these was to gather information and facilitate commercial interaction across the frontier, and there is convincing evidence, particularly in the form of coin and pottery finds, that suggests Byzantium maintained strong trading networks across the lower Danube.⁴³³ Michael Attaleiates vividly describes how these cities became ethnic melting pots, whose inhabitants '*constitute a multilingual crowd*'.⁴³⁴ Local fortresses were often placed in the hands of self-sufficient local nobility who had accepted Byzantine titles, such as the Pecheneg Kegenes mentioned by Skylitzes, who after travelling

⁴²⁸ Madgearu, *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10th-12th Centuries*, p. 169.

⁴²⁹ D. Obolensky, 'The Byzantine Frontier Zones and Cultural Exchanges', in M. Berza & E. Stinescu eds. *Actes du XIV^e Congres International des Etudes Byzantines, Vol. 1* (Bucharest, 1974), p. 304.

⁴³⁰ For instance, see Theophanes, *Chronicle*, p. 61, for the deliberate Byzantine depopulation of the Upper Tigris.

⁴³¹ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 125.

⁴³² Shepard, 'Information, disinformation and delay in Byzantine diplomacy' *Byzantische Forschungen*, 10 (1985), p. 251-3.

⁴³³ I. Dimopoulos, 'Trade of Byzantine red wares, end of 11th-13th centuries', in M. M. Mungo ed., *Byzantine Trade, 4th-12th centuries: the archaeology of local, regional and international Exchange. Papers of the Thirty-eighth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, St John's College, University of Oxford, March 2004* (Oxford, 2009).

⁴³⁴ Attaleiates, *The History*, p. 373.

to Constantinople and promising to become baptised in the Orthodox faith, was granted a title and possession of three fortresses along the Danube by Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos.⁴³⁵

It appears that a similar approach was also applied to the empire's frontiers along the middle Danube. After the reconquest of this region by Basil II, the frontier zone was pushed back further to encompass the stretch of the Morava River between Naissus and the Danube. The wild, overgrown 'Bulgarian Forest' here represented as difficult a barrier to encroaching armies as did the barren Moesian plain. Forests have historically often played a vital role in forming defensive barriers bordering hostile neighbours, and Procopius, for instance, relates how Justinian, in order to overcome the Tzani people that occupied part of the Black Sea coast, deforested vast tracts of land, and by '*transforming the rough places and making them smooth and passable for horses, he brought it about that they mingled with other peoples in the manner of men in general and consented to have intercourse with their neighbours.*'⁴³⁶

The Byzantines were well aware of the difficulties associated with traversing such heavily forested regions, and Maurice advised that on such expeditions, lightly equipped infantry were to be preferred, and pack animals were to be used instead of a heavy baggage train.⁴³⁷ The difficulties experienced during the passage of the Third Crusade, as will be seen, underlies the wisdom of this advice. William of Tyre, who was doubtlessly influenced by his own experiences within Byzantium, provides in his history of the First Crusade a depiction of the wild, lawless conditions prevalent along the Morava River. William claimed that lands which '*border on foreign kingdoms and through which their own lands are approached*' were deliberately left unpopulated by the Byzantines, with the emperor forbidding any settlement or cultivation in these regions. In doing so Byzantium, in the opinion of William, hoped that difficult roads and thorny brambles alone would hinder the passage of hostile forces.⁴³⁸ Similarly Odo of Deuil referred to the section of the route beyond Branichevo as '*the uninhabited portion*',⁴³⁹ and also made mention of the '*wastelands of Bulgaria*' that the crusaders would need to traverse.⁴⁴⁰

The situation does not seem to have been much improved during the Ottoman era, and in the eighteenth century Lady Montagu wrote that '*the desert woods of Servia, are the common refuge of thieves, who rob fifty in a company, so that we had need of all our guards to secure us; and the villages*

⁴³⁵ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, p. 428.

⁴³⁶ Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, p. 209.

⁴³⁷ Maurice, *Strategikon*, p. 152.

⁴³⁸ William of Tyre, *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, trans. E. A. Babcock & A. C. Krey, *A history of deeds done beyond the sea, Vol. 1* (New York, 1976), p. 122.

⁴³⁹ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 41.

⁴⁴⁰ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 25.

are so poor, that only force could extort from them necessary provisions.⁴⁴¹ Further, in the nineteenth century, the French writer Alphonse de Lamartine described how the Serbians used this imposing region for much the same purposes as the Byzantines had, describing a conversation with a local inhabitant who states that ‘each of these trees is a Servian!’, for ‘during the war the Servians found a rampart behind the trunks of their oaks; their forests were and still are their fortresses; every one of these trees is as a comrade in fight; they love them like brothers; so, when Prince Milosch, their present governor, ordered so many trees to be cut down through these forests, to mark out the long road we are tracking, the old Servians often gave him a curse. “Cut down the oaks!” they said, “it is murder against men.” In Servia, man and the oaks are friends.’⁴⁴²

It can be seen, therefore, the important role this region played in Byzantine strategic approaches to the Balkans. The vast forests of the Morava River were a far more daunting obstacle than even the Danube itself, and possession of this region vastly increased the ‘defensive potential’ of the empire. In particular the description of this region by Lady Montagu as a ‘desert’ is a fitting one, for despite its thick vegetation and fertile soils the Morava Valley, if devoid of indigenous habitation, offered next to no succour for any army that attempted to make the passage. In particular there would have been little fodder for horses, and the *Taktikon Vari* notably declares that armies ought to bring as much dry fodder as possible with them before campaigning in the region, as there was no barley, in particular, to be found in ‘Bulgaria’.⁴⁴³

The actions of those governors whom the crusaders encountered on the Byzantine frontier also suggests the isolation of these frontier fortresses. Nicetas, the ‘governor of Bulgaria’, also named by William of Tyre as the ‘*Bulgarorum dux*’, was residing in Belgrade during the passage of the First Crusade, and appears to have been caught unawares by the approach of large numbers of pilgrims and armed mercenaries.⁴⁴⁴ He’d likely had little to no warning of the crusaders arrival and, fearing attack, rapidly retired to Naissus.⁴⁴⁵ This may also explain the attitude of the Duke of Branichevo who greeted the arrival of the participants of the Third Crusade with a similar level of confusion. The crusaders accused the Duke, who they surmised was under instruction from Emperor Isaac Angelos, of deliberately attempting to mislead them, and instructing guides to lead the host by the wrong road.⁴⁴⁶ Afterwards Alexius, Isaac’s uncle, met with Barbarossa at Naissus and apologised for the

⁴⁴¹ Lady M. W. Montagu, *The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 164.

⁴⁴² Alphonse de Lamartine, *A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land: comprising recollections, sketches, and reflections, made during a tour in the East in 1832-1833*, Vol. 3 (Philadelphia, 1835), p. 115.

⁴⁴³ *Taktikon Vari*, p. 303-5.

⁴⁴⁴ William of Tyre, *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, p. 100.

⁴⁴⁵ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 177.

⁴⁴⁶ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 59-60.

actions of the Duke, claiming that he *'had greatly erred, because he had not guided the emperor faithfully and had not given him in any way the service that his lord had instructed him to do.'*⁴⁴⁷ These episodes, in particular Nicetas' rapid retreat from the advance of Peter the Hermit, suggests that it was at Naissus, rather than on the Danube, that effective Byzantine authority was established, with those depopulated lands beyond instead typically entrusted in the hands of native *župans*.⁴⁴⁸

Aside from complications arising from the arrival of crusading forces, the policy of devolving power into the hands of local nobility appears to have been a largely successful one. It is notable that serious difficulties during this period arose when, under Manuel Comnenus, this policy was largely abandoned and the state both took a firmer grip over these outlying fortresses, and sought to extend imperial dominion even further through the annexation of Sirmium and Dalmatia, which led to friction between Byzantium and its Hungarian neighbour. It is possible, however, that Manuel did not entirely abandon the concept of a soft frontier region. The fortress of Belgrade was reconstructed in this period, seemingly not to provide better protection to the local community, but rather to serve as a command post for an imperial officer to police the local community and monitor the lands beyond. The fortress was designed so as to be approached only from the river itself, and from this orientation it can be surmised that the most convenient connection with Belgrade was via the Danube, rather than along the road to Naissus.⁴⁴⁹

Even though Manuel's approach to the empire's frontiers did not long survive his death, whereupon devastating Hungarian raids quickly restored the status quo, they are largely seen as being successful in that they created the peaceful conditions that are the pre-requisite for economic and social growth.⁴⁵⁰ Could the administrative reorganisation of the Balkans from the early eleventh to late twelfth century have therefore also encompassed road construction and maintenance? There is no direct evidence of this occurring, yet the bureaucratic platforms set in place, in particular the installation of military governors, certainly provided the template under which such activity could have occurred. Basil II's famous decree allowing the native population to continue paying taxes in kind quite possibly generated the necessary work force required. Skylitzes reports that this allowed Bulgarian peasants to supply the state with a yearly measure of corn, millet and wine, but this may have only been an example of one kind of service they could render instead of paying their taxes in gold coin.⁴⁵¹ This was evidently a popular measure, for when this privilege was revoked in the 1030s violent

⁴⁴⁷ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 64.

⁴⁴⁸ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 124.

⁴⁴⁹ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 241-2.

⁴⁵⁰ For instance see Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 271-4, and P. Magdalino, *The empire of Manuel Komnenos, 1143-1180* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 174.

⁴⁵¹ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, p. 387.

uprisings resulted. Under Byzantine rule the Balkans beyond the Maritsa Valley and the Gates of Trajan appear to have remained somewhat marginal, and never the object of extensive economic exploitation, with the frequency of coin finds dating from the early eleventh to mid-twelfth centuries suggesting a very slow monetization of the local economy.⁴⁵² It is therefore possible that local Byzantine authorities employed instead compulsory exactions, such as *kastroktisia* and *hodoistrosia*, in lieu of monetary payments.

The medieval urban landscape of the Balkan Peninsula, and the administrative reforms of the eleventh century, therefore provide an enticing backdrop under which the rehabilitation of the *Via Militaris* may have occurred. Such an argument, without the support of corroborative archaeological evidence in particular, must remain mere conjecture. However, what cannot be denied is that by the mid and late eleventh century the *Via Militaris* was able to accommodate a high volume of pilgrims *en route* to the Holy Land. Whilst this does not in itself argue conclusively for comprehensive road construction activity in the preceding decades, it is very difficult to conceive how a road surface that would otherwise have remained largely unrepaired since the reign of Justinian in the sixth century could have so successfully tolerated such a mass of human traffic, as well as its accompanying wagons and beasts of burden.

⁴⁵² C. Morrisson, 'Byzantine Money: its production and circulation', in A. E. Laiou ed., *The Economic History of Byzantium: from the seventh through to the fifteenth century*, Vol. 1 (Washington D.C., 2002), pp. 909-966.

Chapter 10: The Roads of the Ottoman Balkans

The Ottoman roads of the Balkan region are often overlooked, which is unfortunate as they represent a valuable source of information on practices of road construction and maintenance, and in particular offer insight into the ability of the *Via Militaris* to accommodate large volumes of vehicular traffic. Indeed, more information is available about the Ottoman roads of the Balkan Peninsula, in the form of official records and the observations of Western travellers, than those of the preceding periods. More recently Popović has compiled in a single volume a chronological record of travel histories of the *Via Militaris*, in particular focusing on the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴⁵³

The almost universal description of Ottoman roads, recorded in the memoirs of Western travellers, was bad. Ottoman roads were infamous for their poor quality; one road near Thessalonica is described as being '*barely made and full of ruts, in summer it is as hard as stone, and in winter a Slough of Despond*.'⁴⁵⁴ The general impression was that the Ottomans had no particular interest in roads, and were happy to make their own way along rough tracks that were marked infrequently by piles of rubble along their edge. Such descriptions are not necessarily hyperbole, there were indeed some very poor roads in the Ottoman Balkans, particularly in the regions of modern day Albania and the Republic of Macedonia. However, as in the Byzantine Empire and late Roman Empire, the Ottomans built and maintained roads according to their needs, necessarily prioritising those that serviced key strategic frontiers.

The main cause for the misconception held by many Western travellers that the Ottomans simply did not care about roads was due to the frequent employment of beasts of burden by the Ottomans, of which the camel held pride of place. As has been convincingly argued by Bulliet, the camel was such an amazingly efficient means of conveying goods over large distances, the use of the wheel largely fell into abeyance throughout much of the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁵⁵ Without the need for smooth surfaces to convey wheeled vehicles, roads therefore were built rough, and as such were far different to those which Western travellers were more accustomed to travelling on. The use of camels was not universal however, and especially along main roads in the Balkans, ox-drawn carts also were frequently employed, and teams of bison were the favoured means of hauling artillery.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵³ M. Popović, *Von Budapest nach Istanbul: Die Via Traiana im Spiegel der Reiseliteratur des 14. bis 16. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 2006).

⁴⁵⁴ Mackenzie & Irby, *Travels in the Slavonic provinces of Turkey-in-Europe*, p. 90.

⁴⁵⁵ R. W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge, 1975).

⁴⁵⁶ R. Murphy, 'Problems of trade along the *Via Egnatia* in the seventeenth century', in E. A. Zachariadou, *The Via Egnatia under Ottoman rule: 1380-1699* (Crete, 1996), p. 178.

The Ottoman state did expend some resources on infrastructure development, and increasingly so in the nineteenth century as the developments of modern warfare required better communication networks as hitherto had existed. In particular the Ottoman state employed Western engineers to construct new transport routes, capable of accommodating artillery trains, although with mixed success.⁴⁵⁷ The state also became involved in the construction of enormous roads that serviced key frontiers. It is claimed that one that was constructed in the nineteenth century and ran to the Russian frontier was between 50 to 60 yards wide.⁴⁵⁸ Most major roads in the Balkans, however, were usually between 20 and 26 feet wide and constructed of large broken stones and mud.⁴⁵⁹ Observing similar routes in the Anatolian provinces, Ramsay noted that the rough surface of such roads proved so uncomfortable to negotiate, and kicked up so much dust in summer, that most traffic preferred to instead take the old, well-trodden paths.⁴⁶⁰ In the sixteenth century Ogier de Busbecq, who between Philippopolis and Adrianople travelled to the north of the Maritsa River, rather than along the main Ottoman road to its south, may have deliberately chosen to take the old Roman road for this very reason.⁴⁶¹

To build such roads the Ottoman state employed much the same type of resources that the Roman Empire had relied upon, in that they were often constructed either by the army, or large groups of itinerant workers who were contracted to build roads once the harvesting season was over. Groups of seasonal workers, typically of a uniform ethnic composition and organised around a single leadership figure, were a constant feature of the Balkan landscape, right up till the early part of the twentieth century.⁴⁶² The roads themselves were similar to how they would have been in the Byzantine era; crushed rock or other such material was embedded in a bed of sand or gravel, creating an easily maintainable surface that could expand or contract in differing weather conditions. Travellers along Ottoman roads noted regular piles of marble along their length that were used to carry out repairs, whilst the brick work of surviving Byzantine fortresses was often broken down and used in road maintenance.⁴⁶³

Another means of road building and maintenance employed by the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans was via forced exactions on the local populace. According to impressions from Western travellers, in

⁴⁵⁷ Mackenzie & Irby, *Travels in the Slavonic provinces of Turkey-in-Europe*, p. 170-1.

⁴⁵⁸ H. F. Baldwin, *A war photographer in Thrace: an account of personal experiences during the Turco-Balkan War, 1912* (London, 1913), p. 129.

⁴⁵⁹ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Handbook of Turkey in Europe. Compiled by the Geographical section of the Naval intelligence division, Naval staff, Admiralty* (London, 1917), p. 195.

⁴⁶⁰ Ramsay, *The Historical Geography of Asia Minor*, p. 82.

⁴⁶¹ Ghiselin de Busbecq, *Legationis Turcicae Epistolae quatuor*, p. 24.

⁴⁶² R. J. Crampton, *Bulgaria* (Oxford, 2007), p. 284-5.

⁴⁶³ Fraser, *Pictures from the Balkans*, p. 168.

lieu of paying rates, local peasants gave two or three days of labour in the year for road-making.⁴⁶⁴ In other regions it was noted that special tithes were raised to pay for road construction, often only for corrupt local officials to pocket the money and force the local inhabitants to work as forced labour.⁴⁶⁵

There was universal agreement amongst travellers that the roads built by peasant labour in particular were so terrible as to be practically unusable. John Fraser, observing the construction of a road in Albania, remarked that *'the authorities gave instructions to all inhabitants of the region that they were to give four days work a year to provide a good road from Elbasan to Struga. At the present pace it will not be accomplished for four thousand years, and will not then be any good. I saw this road-making going on, but only in those places which happened to be easiest to travel over. The ground was smooth and level. It looked quite nice. A little rain, however, would turn the whole thing to slush.'*⁴⁶⁶ And yet Fraser also noted that in Serbia roads could be found that were the equal, in his opinion, of any to be found in England.⁴⁶⁷

These measures seemed to have sufficed for the mountainous regions of Albania and Macedonia. In the early twentieth century it was remarked that the mountains of the region were perhaps less well known than the mountains of Africa, owing to the lack of maps and good roads.⁴⁶⁸ Such was the state of confusion in this region that guides were frequently extremely difficult to come by, and far less available was good, accurate information on not only which route to take, but even if any route existed at all.⁴⁶⁹ This scenario fits well with Braudel's description of the road network of the Ottoman Empire as little more than narrow paved tracks that could accommodate little or no wheeled traffic.⁴⁷⁰

Yet this was clearly not the case everywhere. The main trunk routes could certainly accommodate wheeled traffic. Along the *Via Militaris* could be found caravans consisting entirely of wagons bound for Poland.⁴⁷¹ The district of Vize, in Thrace, was renowned for the quality of its wagon construction, and from as early as the sixteenth century there are numerous examples of wagons conveying goods as far as Serdica.⁴⁷² The English merchant, Henry Cavendish, travelled to Constantinople with three

⁴⁶⁴ Fraser, *Pictures from the Balkans*, p. 64.

⁴⁶⁵ Mackenzie & Irby, *Travels in the Slavonic provinces of Turkey-in-Europe*, p. 90.

⁴⁶⁶ Fraser, *Pictures from the Balkans*, p. 243.

⁴⁶⁷ Fraser, *Pictures from the Balkans*, p. 64.

⁴⁶⁸ N. Buxton, 'Balkan geography and Balkan railways', *The Geographical Journal*, 32, no. 3 (Sep., 1908), p. 217-8.

⁴⁶⁹ Mackenzie & Irby, *Travels in the Slavonic provinces of Turkey-in-Europe*, p. 113.

⁴⁷⁰ Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, p. 284.

⁴⁷¹ S. Faroqhi, 'Camels, wagons, and the Ottoman state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 14 (1982), p. 532.

⁴⁷² Faroqhi, 'Camels, wagons, and the Ottoman state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', p. 533.

wagons in 1589, with the trip between Serdica and Philippopolis taking three days to complete.⁴⁷³ The English traveller, Peter Mundy, made the journey from Constantinople to Belgrade in 1620 with a company that was accompanied by twelve wagons (Figure 15).⁴⁷⁴ In 1665 the Scotsman John Burbury was part of a diplomatic mission to Constantinople, led by Duke Henry Howard, that, after travelling to Belgrade via the Danube, travelled the rest of the way along the *Via Militaris*, and was accompanied, according to Burbury, by two hundred wagons, with each wagon being pulled by three or four horses.⁴⁷⁵ Commenting on the route between Belgrade and Adrianople, Lady Montagu noted that, *'the road is now made (with great industry) as commodious as possible, for the march of the Turkish army; there is not one ditch or puddle between this place and Belgrade, that has not a large strong bridge of planks built over it.'*⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷³ A. C. Wood, ed., 'Mr Harrie Cavendish his Journey To and From Constantinople by Fox, his servant', *Camden Miscellany*, 17 (1940), p. 15.

⁴⁷⁴ P. Mundy, *Itinerarium Mundi*, R. C. Temple ed., *The Travels of Peter Mundy, in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667 Vol. 1* (1907, Oxford), p. 44.

⁴⁷⁵ J. Burbury, *A relation of a journey of the Right Honourable My Lord Henry Howard, from London to Vienna and thence to Constantinople* (Michigan, 1978), p. 117.

⁴⁷⁶ Lady M. W. Montagu, *The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 168.

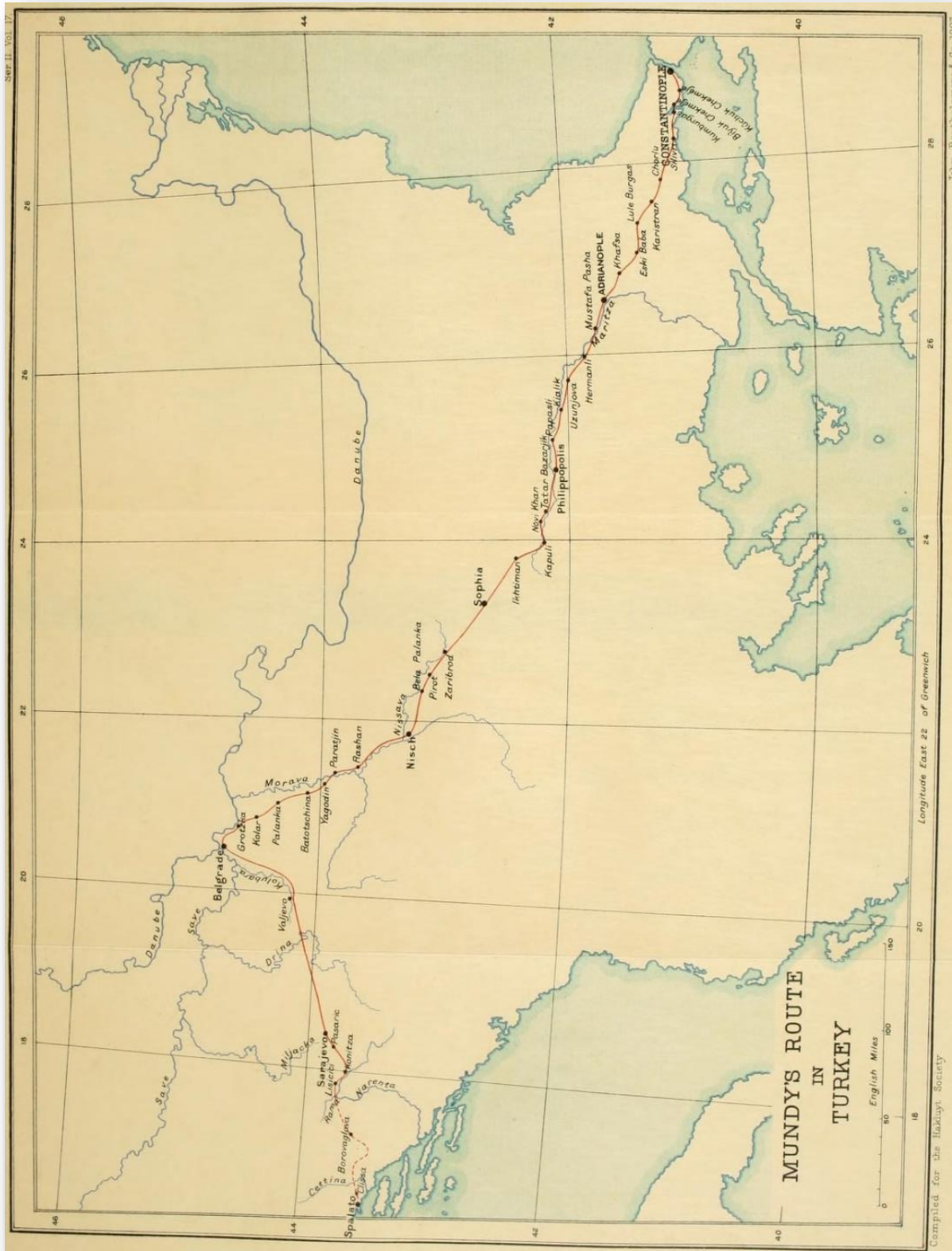


Figure 15: The itinerary of Peter Mundy in 1665. From Mundy, *Itinerarium Mundi*, R. C. Temple ed., *The Travels of Peter Mundy, in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667* Vol. 1 (1907, Oxford).

This heavy volume of traffic argues that the *Via Militaris* remained throughout the Ottoman period the main trunk route by which Constantinople could be reached, and therefore far better maintained than less vital roads. In this respect the *Via Militaris* was likely somewhat exceptional, for it has been argued that trade within the Ottoman Empire was seldom ever more than localised or intra-regional, with long or even medium distance exchange between regions a rare occurrence, and probably largely limited to the camel caravans of the East.⁴⁷⁷ Indeed, Hendy estimates that until the introduction of railways, the speed and cost of transporting goods within the Ottoman Empire likely differed very little from that which had existed in the medieval period.⁴⁷⁸

On the whole, therefore, it appears that Ottoman roads differed little in type and condition from earlier Byzantine or even roads of the late Roman period. As a result, overland trade in this period was also likely highly similar to earlier eras, in that it was predominately local in scope, and the costs of transporting food over long distances would have proved prohibitive. The exception would be where the state was directly involved, either in the appropriation of foodstuffs for the population of Constantinople, or the provisioning of armies in the field. In this respect the *Via Militaris*, still the premier strategic route servicing the middle Danube, likely garnered an exceptional degree of attention. That the Ottoman state sought to maintain the *Via Militaris* in a good condition, capable of accommodating wheeled vehicles, is not terribly surprising, in that the route played a vitally important role in conveying men, artillery and supplies for the campaigns for Belgrade, Budapest and Vienna, to note just a few.

⁴⁷⁷ Murphy, 'Problems of trade along the *Via Egnatia* in the seventeenth century', p. 174.

⁴⁷⁸ Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300–1450*, p. 555.

Chapter 11: The *Via Militaris*

11.1: Belgrade

There is no definitive beginning point for the *Via Militaris*. This thesis will only cover its length from Belgrade onwards, but it is possible to trace its course even further west than that, following the Sava River to Sirmium, then either continuing to follow the Danube to Buda, or, cutting out the great Danubian bend of the central Hungarian plain, taking the pilgrim route across the plain that was built in the early eleventh century.⁴⁷⁹ From here the route proceeded onto Pressburg (modern Bratislava) and then Vienna, opening the way into Central Germany beyond via Regensburg.

Belgrade is a convenient starting point as it can be taken, in a sense, to delineate the furthest extent of Byzantine control over the Danube. In truth, Byzantine authority at times stretched even further to the west, as far as Sirmium. The city of Sirmium declined rapidly from the fourth century onwards however, and although Byzantine hegemony was re-established at this site during the eleventh century, it typically remained outside of the bounds of the empire's direct control and most likely largely under the nominal leadership of local Serbian *župans*.⁴⁸⁰

As such Belgrade, which was approached from the west, across the Sava River, was likely the first contact most travellers would have had with the Byzantine Empire. The fortress of Zemun (Roman Taurunum, and sometimes referred to in crusading sources as Semlin, or Mallevilla), sat opposite Belgrade, across the Sava. The crossing of the Sava was typically a difficult, and time consuming, undertaking. The Sava is fast flowing, with the highest discharge of any tributary into the Danube and prone to flash floods in early summer.⁴⁸¹ Crusaders often found there were too few boats available, which created long delays in crossing. Peter the Hermit's forces during the First Crusade, for instance, took five days to cross from Zemun to Belgrade.⁴⁸²

Belgrade itself sits upon a promontory formed by the confluence of the Sava and the Danube (Figure 16). Protected on three sides by water, it has historically represented the most strategically important location along the middle Danube. The site has been fortified since the early Iron Age, and its defences

⁴⁷⁹ Murray, 'Roads, bridges and shipping in the passage of crusade armies by overland routes to the Bosphorus 1096-1190', p. 188.

⁴⁸⁰ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 122-4. On the late Roman decline of Sirmium see Eadie, 'City and Countryside in late Roman Pannonia: The Regio Simiensis'.

⁴⁸¹ Murray, 'Roads, bridges and shipping in the passage of crusade armies by overland routes to the Bosphorus 1096-1190', p. 201.

⁴⁸² Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, p. 71.

were improved upon by the Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Austrian and finally Serbian occupiers of the site. Sir Arthur Evans, visiting the city in the late nineteenth century, remarked that it possessed the most commanding position of any city in Europe.⁴⁸³

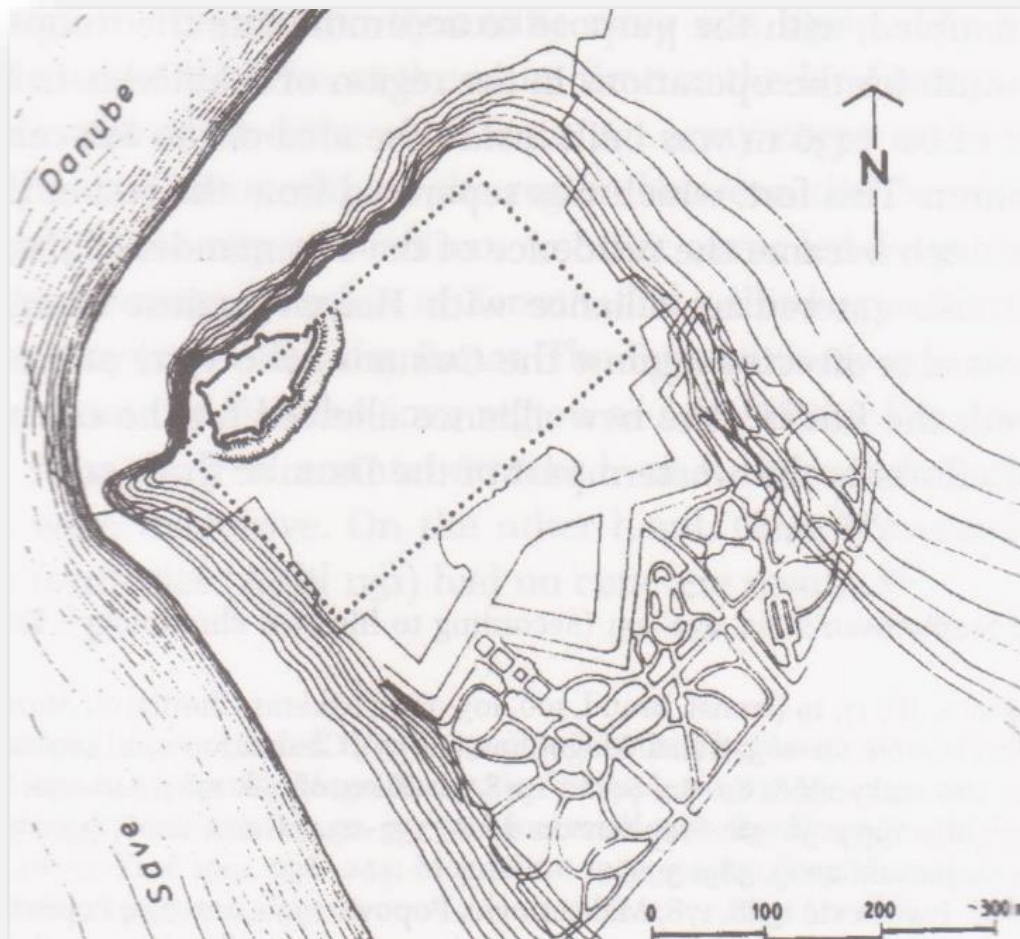


Figure 16: Plan of the medieval fortress at Belgrade. From M. Popović, 'Les forteresses du système défensif byzantin en Serbie au XIe–XIIe siècle' *Starinar*, 42 (1991), p. 171.

The Byzantine city was a far less impressive sight than the one that greeted later travellers however. Crusading sources described the city as being 'half-ruined' and 'a quite miserable place'.⁴⁸⁴ The Roman fortifications that ringed the site had been repaired by Justinian, and further repairs had been made during the reign of Basil II, but by the end of the eleventh century they were evidently in an extremely poor state of disrepair. Furthermore its fortifications enclosed a relatively large area, encompassing the dimensions of the classical city, of approximately 200 by 350 metres, and the small contemporary

⁴⁸³ A. J. Evans, 'The Adriatic Slavs and the overland route to Constantinople', *The Geographical Journal*, 47. no. 4 (April, 1916), p. 260.

⁴⁸⁴ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 59.

population could not hope to defend such a large site.⁴⁸⁵ As such, during the passage of the First Crusade the commander of the city despaired of being able to hold the walls against a potential attack, one that looked likely when Peter the Hermit's forces ravaged Zemun, and so retired instead to the far more secure location of Naissus.⁴⁸⁶ It was not till the reign of Manuel Comnenus that the city would receive more appropriate fortifications, although even then they were more directed at providing a means of policing the frontier and detecting threats originating from across the river than securing the safety of the local inhabitants, which would explain why the participants of the Third Crusade found the city at large to still be in a deplorable state.⁴⁸⁷

From Belgrade the *Via Militaris* proceeded almost due east. Little is known in general of the road throughout much of Serbia, either of its surface, or even its location in more than the most general terms, and that is true here. Two stations are listed in the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* and the *Itinerarium Antonini* between Belgrade and Viminacium; Aureo Monte (or Aureus Mons) and Margo (or Margus). These sites are argued to lie in present day Smederevo and Požarevac respectively.⁴⁸⁸ Smederevo lays on the western bank of the Morava River, some 24 Roman miles (approximately 36 kilometres) from Belgrade, whilst Požarevac is some 8 Roman miles (approximately 12 kilometres) further east, across the Morava and situated on its eastern bank (Figure 17). A bridge may have existed here, and Sir John Mandeville mentions a certain '*bridge of stone that is upon the river of Marrok*', that was likely the Morava.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁵ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 241-2.

⁴⁸⁶ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, p. 17.

⁴⁸⁷ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 241-2.

⁴⁸⁸ D. Mladenovic, *Urbanism and Settlement in the Roman Province of Moesia Superior* (Oxford, 2012).

⁴⁸⁹ John Mandeville, *The travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C. W. R. D. Moseley (London, 2005), p. 7.

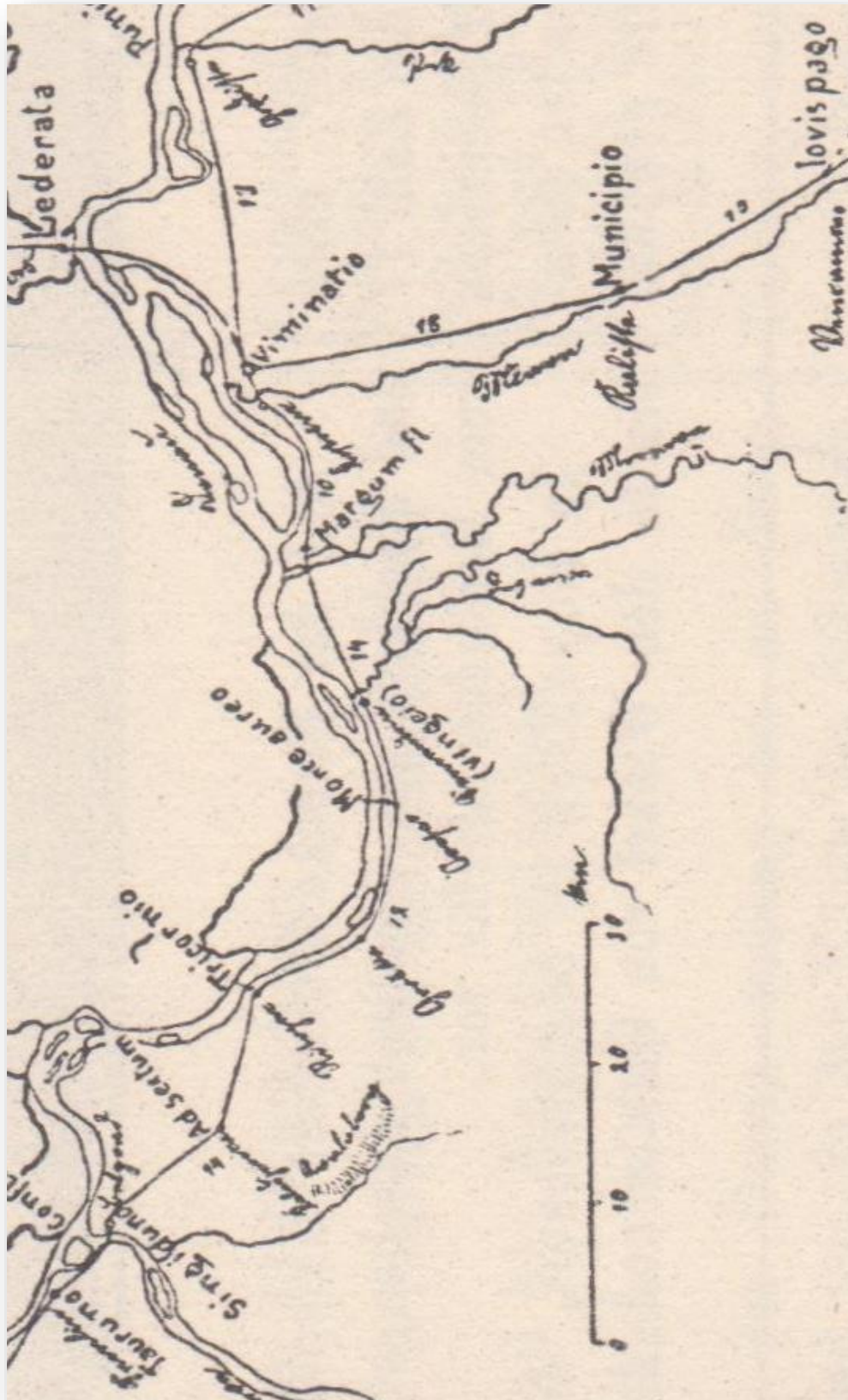


Figure 17: The Roman road network between Singidunum and Branichevo (Viminatio), from Miller, *Itineraria Romana*, p. 499.

11.2: Branichevo

Lying approximately ten Roman miles from Margo was the legionary barracks of Viminacium, also known as Branichevo or Branits in medieval sources. Like Belgrade, Branichevo's walls were rebuilt by Justinian, and were further repaired during the reign of Basil II (Figure 18). Again like Belgrade, the city seems to have fallen largely into ruin by the twelfth century, and Odo of Deuil referred to it as a 'poor town'.⁴⁹⁰ For those who had travelled overland, the journey from Belgrade was of about three days duration (although Odo of Deuil claimed it could be made in a single day), whilst for those who had travelled down the Danube, Branichevo represented their terminus point, and it was from here that boats were unloaded and preparations made for the long overland journey south to Naissus.⁴⁹¹ During the Third Crusade Barbarossa shipped a large amount of goods and supplies, in addition to a tent that had been gifted to him by Queen Margaret of Hungary, to Branichevo, and the army was there delayed for six days whilst the ships were unloaded.⁴⁹²

⁴⁹⁰ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 31.

⁴⁹¹ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 31.

⁴⁹² *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 59-60. For the chronology of the crusade's departure from Branichevo see Nesbitt, 'The rate of march of Crusading armies in Europe', p. 178.

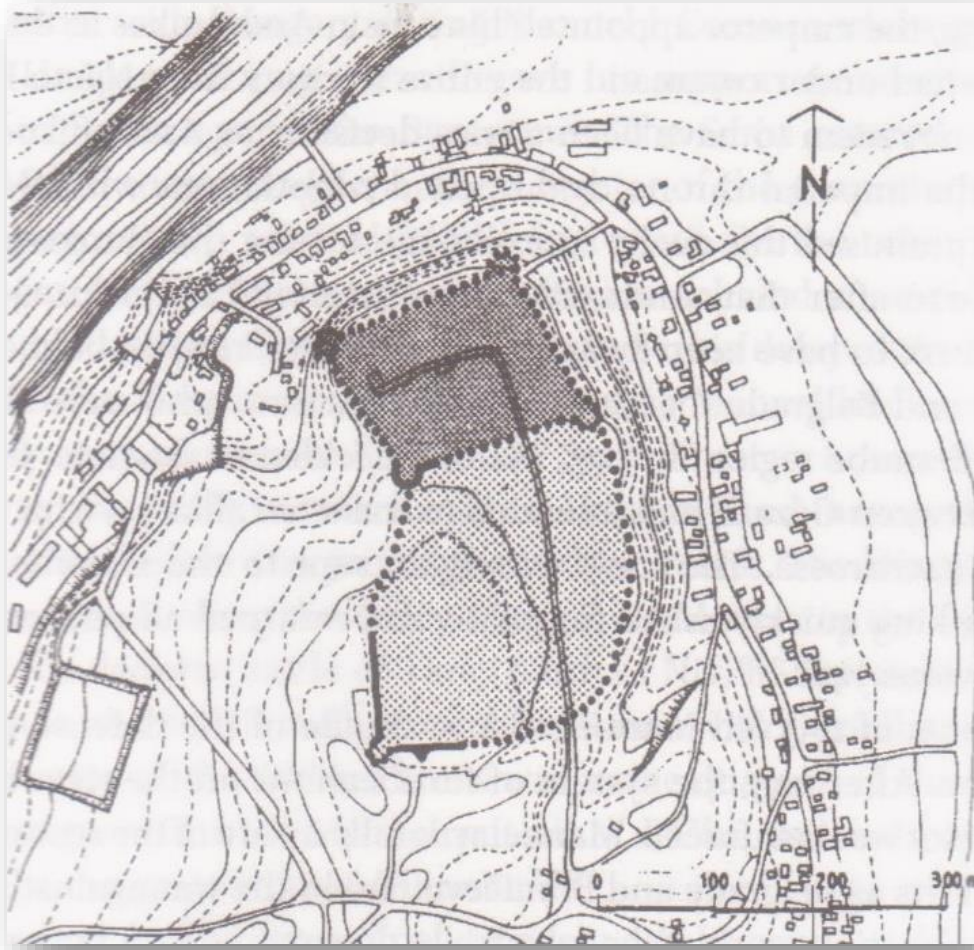


Figure 18: Plan of medieval Branichevo, from Popović, 'Les forteresses du système défensif byzantin en Serbie au XIe–XIIe siècle', p. 171.

The route south from Branichevo to Naissus is perhaps the least known section of the entire route of the *Via Militaris*. The *Itinerarium Burdigalense* lists nine stations along the route; Municipium, Jovis Pagus, Bao, Idomum, Oromagus, Sarmatae, Cametae, Ipompei, and Rappiana. The *Tabula Peutingerina* lists six stations between the two; Municipio, Jovis Pago, Idimo, Horrea Margi, Presidio Pompei, and Gramrianis, whereas the *Itinerarium Antoninii* lists only four: Municipio, Idimo, Horreo Margi, and Pompeis (Figure 19). This region was so heavily devastated during the fourth and fifth centuries that the archaeological record suggests it was never again repopulated to any great degree. Even then, archaeological surveys of this region have been few, and only a small number of these stations have been definitively located, such as Horreum Margi in the modern Serbian town of

Ćuprija.⁴⁹³ This location may also correspond to the town of Rabnel, which is mentioned in the *Historia de Expeditione*.⁴⁹⁴ Certainly a great deal is yet to be done in tracing the history of the Morava Valley region in the post-Roman era, and all that can be confidently said is that the *Via Militaris* must have followed the course of the Morava River closely, as it is the only practical north-south route in this part of the Balkan Peninsula.

⁴⁹³ On the current state of archaeological research in the Morava Valley see Mladenovic, *Urbanism and Settlement in the Roman Province of Moesia Superior*, p. 7.

⁴⁹⁴ Eickhoff, *Friedrich Barbarossa im Orient*, p. 59.

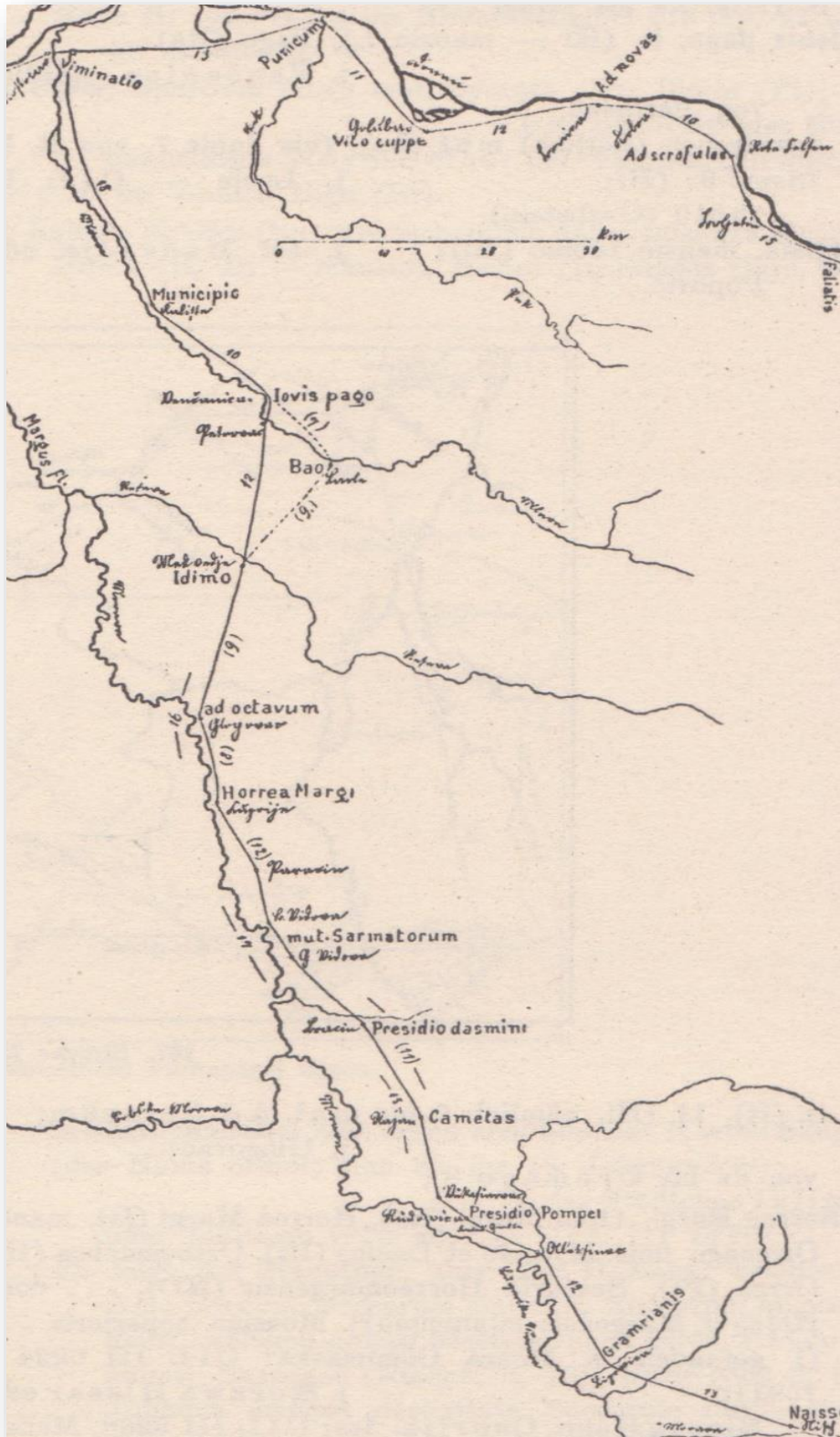


Figure 19: The route south from Viminatio (Branichevo) to Naissus, from Miller, *Itineraria Romana*, p. 530. The Roman road ran through this forested region down the eastern bank of the Morava as far as the city of Naissus, some 120 Roman miles (approximately 180 kilometres) distant. In total this journey

took approximately five to eight days to complete and the latter is the length of time it took Peter the Hermit's contingent of the First Crusade to cover this distance.⁴⁹⁵ For a single mounted traveller, or a small group, this distance could naturally be covered much faster. A Hunnic messenger to the Byzantine court in the fifth century complained that the terms of their recently agreed peace agreement were not being followed as markets were not being provided on the Danube as agreed, but rather at Naissus, a five day march to the south.⁴⁹⁶

A travel time of between five to eight days is roughly consistent across the history of this route. For instance in the seventeenth century, the English traveller Henry Blount, in a large party that included numerous horse-drawn wagons, took twelve days to travel from Belgrade to Sofia.⁴⁹⁷ Yet it took Barbarossa's forces during the Third Crusade a similar amount of time just to cover the distance between Branichevo and Naissus, leaving the former on the 9th of July and reaching Naissus on the 23rd.⁴⁹⁸ The much slower progress of Barbarossa's army during the Third Crusade raises a curious issue. The *Historia de Expeditione* relates that the crusaders were led by guides, given to them by the *Doux* of Branichevo, along an alternate road south (*saxosa et non publica*).⁴⁹⁹ The crusaders, believing that the *Doux* had deliberately misled them on the orders of the Byzantine Emperor Isaac Angelos, confronted their guides and demanded to be led back onto the 'public road' (*trita semita seu strata publica*).⁵⁰⁰

This episode has raised differing opinions as to the route between Branichevo and Naissus during this period. The main Roman road clearly ran down the eastern bank of the Morava; Ogier de Busbecq describes how, when travelling down the Ottoman road on the eastern bank of the Morava, fragments of an older Roman road could clearly be seen running parallel to it.⁵⁰¹ Murray argues that in the twelfth century, however, the *Via Militaris* had become so difficult to traverse, owing to lack of repair, that the guides sought to lead the crusaders by an alternate, easier, road, one that potentially lay on the western bank of the Morava, and likely followed the route taken by a secondary Roman road.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁵ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, p. 19.

⁴⁹⁶ Priscus, *Historia*, p. 243.

⁴⁹⁷ H. Blount, *A voyage into the Levant with particular observations concerning the moderne condition of the Turks, and other people under that Empire* (Amsterdam, 1977), p. 11-12.

⁴⁹⁸ Nesbitt, *The rate of march of crusading armies in Europe*, p. 179.

⁴⁹⁹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 59-60.

⁵⁰⁰ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 60. It is notable that Otto of St Blasien provides a very different account, claiming that since the Bulgarian inhabitants 'denied him "the king's high way"', Barbarossa took it by force, hanging many of those who opposed him on the trees alongside the road. Otto's account, however, lacks the credibility of a first-hand source like that of the *Historia de Expeditione*. See Loud, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa*, p. 177.

⁵⁰¹ Ghiselin de Busbecq, *Legationis Turcicae Epistolae quatuor*, p. 16.

⁵⁰² Murray, 'Roads, bridges and shipping in the passage of crusade armies by overland routes to the Bosphorus 1096-1190', p. 203.

Indeed the French pilgrim Bertrandon de La Brocquière, who travelled from Naissus to Belgrade in 1433, clearly does so on the west bank of the Morava, along what he describes as a muddy road.⁵⁰³ In 1553 Hans Dernschwam likewise travelled down the west bank of the Morava, as does John Burbury in 1655, before crossing the Morava via a wooden bridge to reach Naissus.⁵⁰⁴ This bridge was likely located at Čuprija, and depictions of the Ottoman road network in this region show the road splitting here, with one road following the east bank, and another the west (Figure 20).



Figure 20: The Ottoman road where it crossed the Morava at Čuprija. From Kiepert, *General-Karte von der europäischen Türkei: nach allen vorhandenen Originalkarten und itinerarischen Hilfsmitteln*.

A further complication is raised by the account of Priscus, who made the journey from Naissus to the Danube himself in the sixth century as an ambassador to the court of Attila.⁵⁰⁵ Priscus describes travelling along a path that took ‘many twists and turns and detours’, and indeed the path twisted around so much that owing to the ‘irregularity of the terrain’ the travellers lost their sense of direction and were shocked to see the sun rise in the west the next morning, not the east. This has raised debate as to which route Priscus took to the Danube, and indeed where exactly Attila’s court lay.

⁵⁰³ B. de La Brocquière, *Le Voyage d’Outremer*, p. 275.

⁵⁰⁴ Dernschwam, *Ein Fugger-Kaufmann im Osmanischen Reich*, p. 10., Burbury, *A relation of a journey of the Right Honourable My Lord Henry Howard*, p. 124.

⁵⁰⁵ Priscus, *Historia*, p. 249-50.

Browning argues that Priscus must have crossed the Danube at Ratiaria, a legionary barracks located further down the Danube near the modern city of Vidin, claiming that since the party travelled for only two days to reach the river then it is more reasonable to assume that the party covered the distance between Ratiaria and Naissus (approximately 60 Roman miles) in this time than the near 120 Roman miles to Branichevo.⁵⁰⁶ Blockley, however, challenges this interpretation, claiming that this ignores Priscus' own statement that he was marching westwards.⁵⁰⁷ This thesis cannot offer a definitive answer to this question, however Browning's argument that Priscus' description of the route from Naissus, with its twists and turns and difficult terrain, was highly unlike that which a traveller would expect along a major Roman road, such as the *Via Militaris*, seems a highly pertinent one. The route through the Morava Valley was densely forested, but it was otherwise free of the 'irregular terrain' that Priscus describes, and moreover the Roman road, as far as can be ascertained, travelled consistently to the north. This either suggests that Priscus did indeed take the road to Ratiaria, which encompasses far rougher terrain than that found in the Morava Valley, or that another route to the north existed. Certainly it seems doubtful that the road Priscus described could possibly have been a major Roman highway like the *Via Militaris*.

A potential answer may be found in the argument that the link between Branichevo and Naissus was a late addition to the *Via Militaris*. An inscription, dating to the reign of Hadrian, suggests that the road was only completed after the conquest of Dacia.⁵⁰⁸ Until this point the road along the Danube built by Nero, through the 'Iron Gates', was a more important route for the Romans whilst Viminacium was used as a base from which the conquest of Dacia was being prosecuted. Speidel, however, argues that the use of 'nova' in the inscription does not necessarily mean 'new', but rather 'renewed', in that an existing road south to Naissus was rebuilt in the second century during the reign of Hadrian (Figure 21).⁵⁰⁹ Accordingly, whilst a road between Viminacium and Naissus existed from the second century onwards, it was also the case that an important road between Naissus and Ratiaria was also in existence at this time. Whilst with the collapse of the Danubian limes the road along the Morava River became the preferred route, other potential roads between the Danube and Naissus may have been available, albeit of varying levels of quality, one of which may have indeed run to the west of the Morava, and subsequently been utilised by the Byzantines in the twelfth century.

⁵⁰⁶ R. Browning, 'Where was Attila's camp?', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 73 (1953), p. 143-4.

⁵⁰⁷ R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, Vol. II (Liverpool, 1983), p. 382, n.29.

⁵⁰⁸ M. Mirković, 'Vom obermösischen Limes nach dem Süden: Via Nova von Viminacium nach Dardanien', in W. S. Hanson & L. J. F. Keppie eds., *Roman frontier studies 1979: papers presented to the 12th International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies* (Oxford, 1980), p. 745-55.

⁵⁰⁹ M. P. Speidel, 'The road to Viminacium', *Roman Army Studies*, Vol 2 (Stuttgart, 1992), p. 170-2.

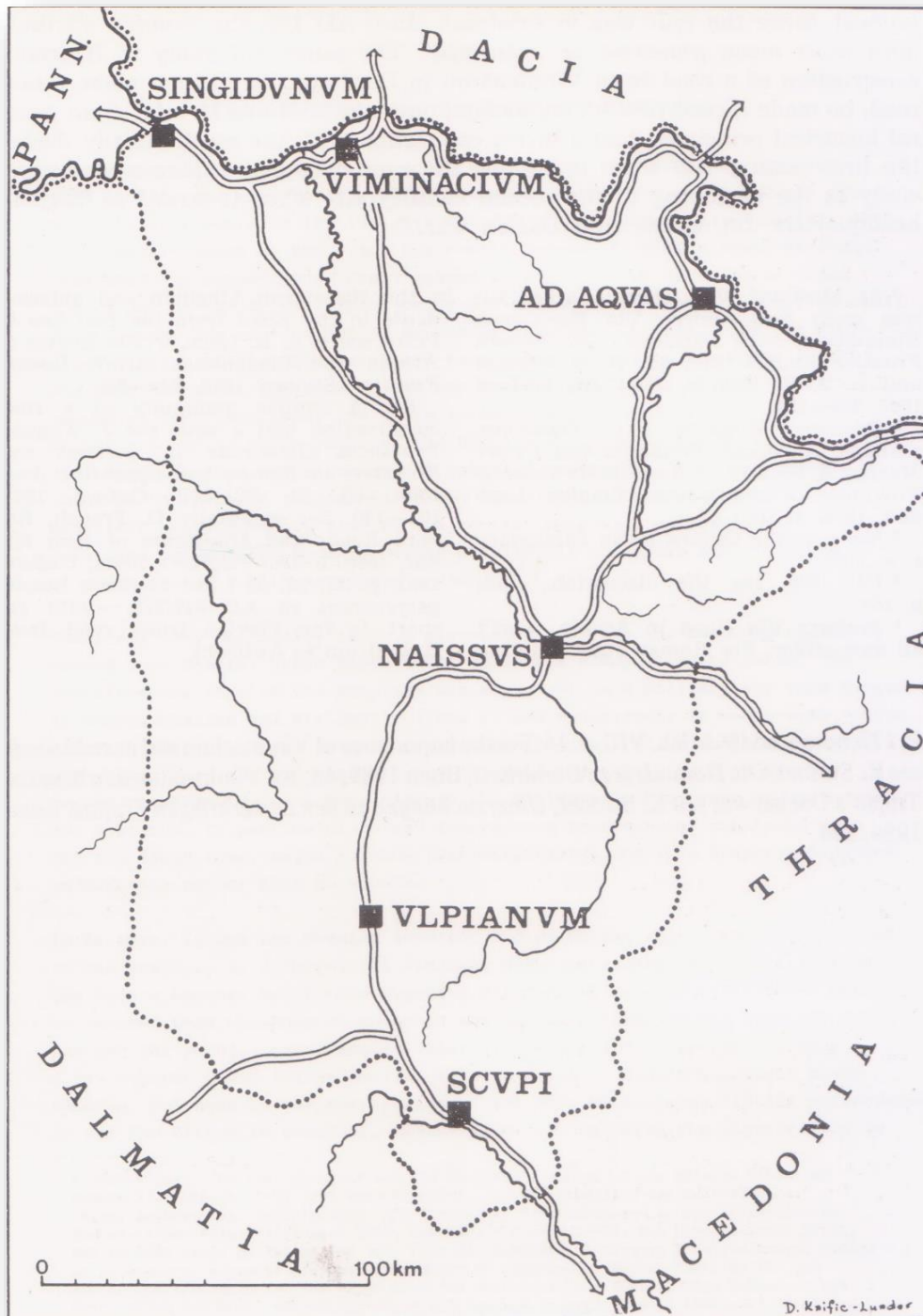


Figure 21: Depiction of the Roman road system of Upper Moesia showing roads running down both sides of the Morava River, from Speidel, 'The road to Viminacium', p. 171.

Whichever course the *Via Militaris* took between Branichevo and Naissus, it is evident that it was in an appalling condition in the twelfth century. Henry the Lion, Barbarossa's long time sparring partner, attempted to travel this route whilst on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1172. The wagons which were

used, which had been shipped down the Danube from Regensburg before being unloaded at Branichevo, had to be abandoned before the pilgrims reached Naissus, as the road was so swampy and muddy the pilgrims simply could not get them through.⁵¹⁰

Moreover, the route was often a dangerous one. This region was in crusader sources a wild, lawless land, typically referred to as the Bulgarian Forest (variously *Silva Bulgarica*, *nemora Bulgarorum*, or *silva Bulgarorum*). This was a vast impenetrable forest of predominately oak trees, known locally as the *Šumadija*, which covered much of modern lowland Serbia until the mid-nineteenth century when it was largely cleared. Nourished by the long cool winters and heavy rains typical of this region, it long represented a formidable barrier to travellers.⁵¹¹ Alexander Kinglake, travelling to Constantinople in 1834, describes his journey through this region: '*we entered the great Servian forest. Through this our road was to last for more than a hundred miles. Endless and endless now on either side the tall oaks closed in their ranks, and stood gloomily lowering over us, as grim as an army of giants with a thousand years' pay in arrear.*'⁵¹²

This region was regarded with a great deal of fear and trepidation by crusaders, for the forest had been allowed to grow right up to the edges of the road, indeed during the passage of the Third Crusade Barbarossa was forced to send men ahead with axes to clear a path (Figure 22).⁵¹³ The overgrown route afforded ample opportunities for brigands to launch ambushes, and their assaults were a common aggravation for travellers. The Great German Pilgrimage of 1064-65 was subjected to attacks in this region, and as soon as the pilgrims crossed the Morava River they were assaulted by robbers and bandits.⁵¹⁴ Barbarossa's followers suffered particularly heavily in this region, with foragers being '*murdered wholesale during the daytime*' and as a result the force suffered a heavy death toll through starvation.⁵¹⁵

⁵¹⁰ Arnold of Lübeck, *Arnoldi Chronica Slavorum*, p. 15.

⁵¹¹ M. Mazower, *The Balkans: a short history* (New York, 2000), p. 4.

⁵¹² A. W. Kinglake, *Eothen: traces of travel brought back home from the East* (Illinois, 1996), p. 13-4.

⁵¹³ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 59-60.

⁵¹⁴ *Annales Altahenses maiores*, p. 3-4.

⁵¹⁵ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 60.



Figure 22: Barbarossa ordering the clearing of forests in 'Hungary' during the passage of the Third Crusade, from Peter of Eboli, *De Rebus Siculis Carmen*, ed., E. Rota, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 31 (Città di Castello, 1904), p. 360.

Nevertheless, for all of the difficulties it presented the road was not an impassable one, and the contingents of the First and Second Crusades who had made use of it seemingly suffered far less in the journey than did Barbarossa's contingent of the Third Crusade. Indeed, according to Odo of Deuil the French contingent of the Second Crusade were able to cover this section in a mere four days, although this is surely a gross underestimate. Moreover, shortly after the passage of the Third Crusade (in either 1191 or 1192) Isaac Angelos was able to lead a successful campaign against the Vlachs that were menacing Naissus, and thereafter march to the Sava River for a meeting with King Béla III of Hungary, before returning to Philippopolis.⁵¹⁶

The sources would therefore seem to suggest that by the late twelfth century the road between Naissus and the Danube was navigable for light troops, likely accompanied by limited numbers of beasts of burden, but far less so for large armies and heavily loaded wagons. It is curious therefore, that the passage of the First Crusade and Second Crusades appears to have involved far less difficulties than that experienced by the Third. Perhaps it was the case that the increase in traffic in the intervening period had seriously impacted upon the road surface, the quality of which therefore declined rapidly as the century came to a close.

⁵¹⁶ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 239.

11.3: Naissus

Naissus is situated on the Nishava River, which is a tributary of the Morava, and the city is located some ten kilometres downriver from where the two meet. The area inhabited by the modern city of Niš has been occupied for over two millennia, and was protected by a fortress located on the northern bank of the Nishava. The current remains of a fortress on this site are entirely of Ottoman origin, built in the early eighteenth century, and covering an area of some 22 hectares. Pre-dating this construction are Roman and later medieval fortifications. The orientation of the earlier construction has been preserved, particularly in the location of the two main gates, its western and southern gates, which were known in the Ottoman period as the Belgrade and Stambol gates respectively.

Naissus, aside from those cities on the Danube, the most distant from the capital on the route of the *Via Militaris* and therefore most isolated, was subjected to a brutal sack by Hunnic forces in 441, and the historian Priscus, passing through a short time later, described the city as '*utterly devoid of inhabitants, full only of horror and ruins.*'⁵¹⁷ The city was restored under Justinian, with its Roman walls being repaired and thickened. Naissus was further attacked numerous times by Slavic tribes during the course of the sixth and seventh centuries, before falling to a combined Slavic-Avar assault in 615. Little is known of its fate after this period, other than that it was seized by the Bulgar Khan Krum in 809, before its reabsorption back into the Byzantine Empire by Basil II.

The valley in which the city sits is an extremely fertile one, fed by alluvial deposits carried by the Nishava River, and favoured by a temperate continental climate, it is today the centre of intensive agricultural production. Numerous historical sources also contain descriptions of the richness of the region. Albert of Aachen spoke of the '*wonderful abundance of food*' that greeted the crusaders here,⁵¹⁸ whilst the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus commented that Naissus was a well-supplied city (*copiosum oppidum*).⁵¹⁹ Visiting the city in 1717, Lady Mary Wortley remarked that it possessed '*so fruitful a soil, that the great plenty is hardly credible.*'⁵²⁰ The city was heavily devastated by a Hungarian invasion in 1185 however, and by the time Barbarossa's force arrived the region had still not completely recovered. Nevertheless, throughout the medieval period the city was a relatively rich one, and one of the few places *en route* to Constantinople where crusaders could hope to be provided with markets with which to purchase food.

⁵¹⁷ Priscus, *Historia*, p. 249.

⁵¹⁸ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, p. 73.

⁵¹⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri*, trans. J. C. Rolfe. *Ammianus Marcellinus*, Vol.2, p. 137.

⁵²⁰ Lady M. W. Montagu, *The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 158.

Naissus had therefore always been a key commercial and strategic site along the *Via Militaris*. Given municipal status in the second century AD, according to Ammianus Marcellinus it was '*magnificently ornamented*' by Constantine the Great in the fourth century, when it also became an important episcopal seat.⁵²¹ The *Augustus* Julian chose the city as his base of operations when civil war broke out in the empire in 361, partly because of the ease of securing supplies in the region, but also because the city's position afforded it a commanding position over not only the *Via Militaris*, but also routes south to Thessalonica, and west to Dalmatia. A further road, as noted above, linked the city with the legionary station of Ratiaria, located on the Danube, approximately 27 kilometres from the modern city of Vidin. Naissus sat in the centre of a matrix of road networks that spread in all four directions, and was therefore a crucial location for the control of the Central Balkans.⁵²²

The city retained this status whilst under Byzantine control, and upon its reabsorption into the empire in the beginning of the eleventh century its importance as a military outpost is emphasised by a seal, dated to the mid-eleventh century, that indicates it became the seat of a *strategos*, initially held by Nicephorus Lykaon, *protospatharios*.⁵²³ Further, its economic status was enhanced by its connection, via the Vardar Valley, to the flourishing trade centre of Thessalonica, with medieval ceramic finds within the city suggesting it was the beneficiary of long distant trade.⁵²⁴ In the *De Administrando Imperio* Constantine Porphyrogenitus makes the astounding claim that '*from Thessalonica to the river Danube where stands the city called Belgrade, is a journey of eight days, if one is not travelling in haste but by easy stages*'.⁵²⁵ This claim is certainly difficult to believe, even if the roads were in good repair and changes of mounts readily available. However it does argue for the importance of this north-south route, which Naissus was ideally positioned to benefit from. Later in the mid-twelfth century, during the reign of Manuel Comnenus, Naissus emerged as an important mustering site for imperial armies, and a convenient base to guard over potential advances from both the Serbians to the east, and the Hungarians to the north.⁵²⁶

The surrounding environment of Naissus provides plentiful information as to the route the *Via Militaris* took as it left the city, even if the road itself has disappeared. Just beyond the city walls of Naissus lay the suburb of Mediana, built alongside the southern bank of the Nishava, and around a

⁵²¹ V. P. Petrovic, V. Filipovic, & K. Luka, 'The roman road Naissus - Timacum Maius – Timacum Minus – Conbustica – Ratiaria', *Ratiaria Semper Floreat*, 1 (2014), p. 97.

⁵²² For further information on these routes, see J. J. Wilkes, 'The Roman Danube: an archaeological survey', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 95 (2005).

⁵²³ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 124.

⁵²⁴ Laiou, 'Regional networks in the Balkans in the Middle and Late Byzantine Periods', p. 136-7.

⁵²⁵ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, trans. R. J. H. Jenkins (Washington D.C., 1967), p. 183.

⁵²⁶ Kinnamos, *The Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus*, p. 83 & p. 161-2.

thermal spring. The site covers some 6,000 square metres, and its main feature is a Roman villa that is reputedly the birth place of Constantine the Great. The villa was richly expanded in the early fourth century, with the addition of mosaics and frescos, whilst at the site itself 80 structures have been uncovered, including *thermae*, churches, and granaries, as well as a complex water supply system and aqueduct (Figure 23).⁵²⁷



Figure 23: Remains of Mediana, on the outskirts of modern Niš.

Mediana held a prominent role in the history of the fourth century Roman Empire. Constantine stayed often in the villa, and passed numerous laws there in his lifetime. The co-emperors Valentinian and Valens also met there in 365 in order to define their respective spheres of influence. In the late fourth century, however, the site was subject to a fire, and then completely destroyed in the Hunnic invasion of 441. Partly restored under Justinian, it subsequently fell into decay once again, and was finally abandoned, probably sometime in the late sixth century when Naissus came under continued Slavic attack.

Meanwhile, between the modern city of Niš and the remains of Mediana, sits what is locally known as the ‘Tower of Skulls’ (Serbian *Ćele kula*). This three metre high tower was raised in 1809 on the orders of Hurshid Pasha, the Ottoman Grand Vizier of Niš, after a failed Serbian uprising in the city in that

⁵²⁷ J. Šašel, *Tabula imperii Romani: Naissus, Dyrrhachion-Scupi-Serdica-Thessalonike: d'après la Carte internationale du monde au 1:1,000,000, K 34 Sofia* (Ljubljana, 1976), p. 84-5.

same year. In it were embedded 952 skulls of slain Serbian revolutionaries, from whence it draws its name, and served as a warning against any further uprisings in the city. In order to fulfil this purpose the Skull Tower would have been located in the most prominent location possible and was therefore positioned on the main Ottoman highway leading from the city towards Constantinople, and there are references to the tower by nineteenth century travellers which remark upon the striking impact it made.⁵²⁸

That the *Via Militaris* left the city via the south gate and crossed the Nishava River before proceeding to the east is further supported by evidence found within crusading chronicles. Albert of Aachen, in relating the experiences of Peter the Hermit at the city, states that Peter and his men approached the walls of the city, and *'there they crossed a river by way of a stone bridge in front of the city, and by pitching their tents they took possession of a meadow, delightful in its greenness and wide extent, and the bank of the river'*.⁵²⁹ The following day Peter was compelled to return to the city to solve a dispute that erupted between its citizens and certain 'Swabians' in his force. Whilst Peter was *'a mile away'* from the city, trying to restore order, a large group broke free from the main army and, *'advanced in great assault over the aforesaid stone bridge to the walls and gate over the city'*, whilst *'another thousand similarly frivolous youth, rushing together across the ford and the bridge with loud shouting and rage, joined them in support.'*⁵³⁰

This stone bridge dated from the Roman period and was positioned outside the southern gate of the city, on the site of the modern bridge (Figure 24).⁵³¹ This suggests that, coming from the north, Peter and his host crossed the Nishava and camped on its southern bank. When, after Peter had departed to the east, elements turned back to attack the city, they recrossed the bridge to assault the walls. The Roman road, therefore, must have run along the southern bank of the Nishava as it progressed to the east. This lends credence to the argument that the suburb of Mediana and the Skull Tower both lay on the route of the ancient Roman road, which is today covered by a section of the major Serbian-Bulgarian road, the E-771, suggesting a continuity of road infrastructure in this region that stretches back near two millennia (Figure 25).

⁵²⁸ Alphonse de Lamartine, *A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, p. 105-6.

⁵²⁹ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, p. 19.

⁵³⁰ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, p. 23.

⁵³¹ Bertrandon de La Brocquière also mentions crossing a bridge before entering the city, *Le Voyage d'Outremer*, p. 271.



Figure 24: The modern bridge over the Nishava, with the remains of the Ottoman fortress on its northern bank.

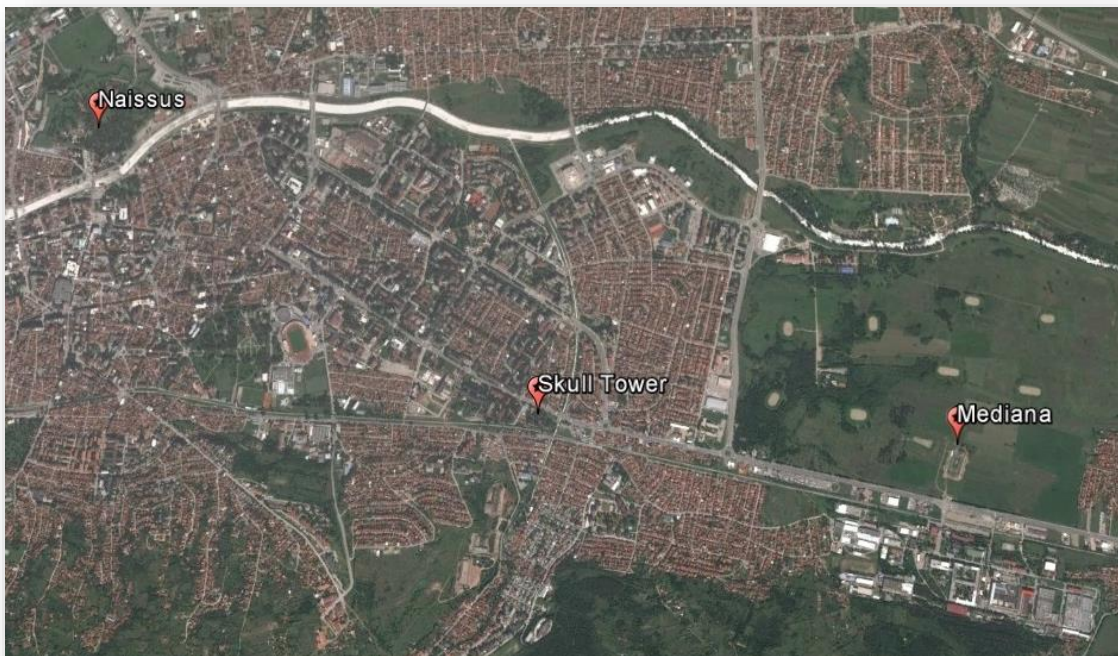


Figure 25: Modern Niš, showing the relative locations of the Nishava River, the remains of the fortress, the Skull Tower, and Mediana. The main east-west road, the E-771, must closely mirror the route taken by the *Via Militaris*. Image captured via Google Earth.

Heading east, the *Via Militaris* followed the course of the Nishava River as far as the modern Serbian-Bulgarian border, approximately 150 kilometres distant. The route of the road can be closely approximated, particularly when it travels through the narrow, 17 kilometre long, Nishava River gorge (known in Serbia as the Sićevo gorge). The Nishava generally lies approximately 250 metres above sea level, whilst the ridges of the valley through which it runs rise to 500 to 750 metres in height on either side, with occasional peaks of over 1000 metres. The main Serbian-Bulgarian highway, the E-80 (which the E-771 joins), follows this route, as does the rail line connecting the two countries, constructed in the late nineteenth century. The *Via Militaris* kept to the south of the Nishava, although just before it reached the modern Bulgarian border it must have crossed to the north of the river, as this is where a segment of the road was recently uncovered. There is no mention of a bridge in any of the sources, however the Nishava is not especially broad nor fast flowing as it approaches Bulgaria and therefore relatively easily fordable. Kiepert's map of the Ottoman road as it existed in the mid-nineteenth century indicates that the *Via Militaris* crossed the Nishava at Zaribrod, or Tsaribrod, the old Bulgarian name for Dimitrovgrad (Figure 26).



Figure 26: Route of the Ottoman road through the Dragoman Pass in the nineteenth century, and the crossing at 'Zaribrod'. From Kiepert, *General-Karte von der europäischen Türkei: nach allen vorhandenen Originalkarten und itinerarischen Hilfsmitteln*.

The three different Roman itineraries share the same number of major stations between Naissus and the next city along the route, Serdica. The *Itinerarium Burdigalense* lists three *mansion*: Romansiana, Turre and Meldia, and five *mutation*: Redices, Latina, Translites, Ballanstra and Ulmus Scretisca. The *Tabula Peutingerina* lists three *mansion*: Remesiana, Turribus, and Meldiis, the same number as the *Antonini Augusti*; Remisiana, Turribus, and Meldia (Figure 27). Two of the three *mansio* that are common across all three sources can be readily identified with contemporary locations; Remesiana (or Romansiana) with the city of Bela Palanka, and Turre (or Turribus) with Pirot. The third station, Meldiis (or Meldia), is usually identified with either Dimitrovgrad, or Dragoman.

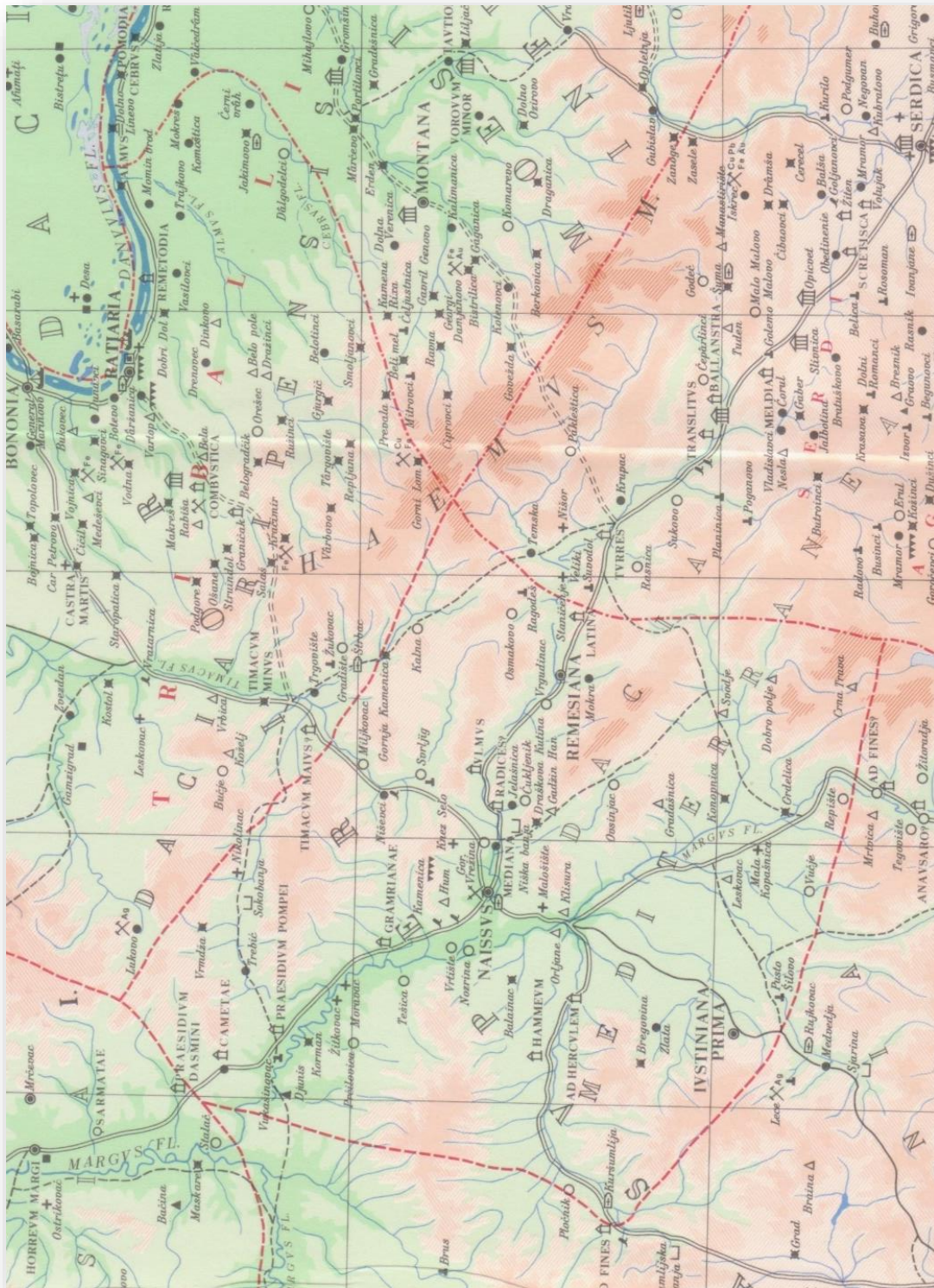


Figure 27: Route of the Via Militaris between Naissus and Serdica. From, Šašel, *Tabula imperii Romani: Naissus, Dyrrhachion-Scupi-Serdica-Thessalonike*.

The first major station after Naissus, Remesia, is marked as lying between 24 and 27 Roman miles from Naissus across the three itineraries. This distance (between 35 and 39 kilometres) does not

equate neatly with the modern road distance between Niš and Bela Palanka of 44 kilometres, where the modern road closely follows the course of the Nishava through the narrow Nishava Gorge. The difference in the noted distances is, therefore, surprising, although, as noted above, distances noted in the itineraries need to be handled with some care, even if the Roman route would not have been as sinuous as the modern road.

There seems little doubt that the route of the *Via Militaris* would have generally followed the course of the Nishava quite closely. Indeed, it has been suggested that the existence of a medicinal herb within the Sićevo Gorge, *Salvia officinalis*, which is indigenous to the Adriatic Coast, may have been introduced to the area by those who travelled along the route.⁵³² However a potential answer to the above discrepancy is that it may have been the case that the Roman road, or perhaps a branch of it, did not exactly follow the course of the Nishava River across this particular section, as the modern roads do today, but rather continued due east, cutting off a long loop of the Nishava, and re-joining it just before it reaches Bela Palanka. The US Army map of 1943 indicates the existence of a road in this region that took this course and a journey along this route is far closer to the 24-27 Roman miles mentioned in the itineraries (Figure 28).

⁵³² D. Stojanović, J. Aleksić, I. Jančić & R. Jančić, 'A Mediterranean medicinal plant in the continental Balkans: A plastid DNA-based phylogeographic survey of *Salvia officinalis* (Lamiaceae) and its conservation implications', *Willdenowia*, 45 (2015), p. 104.



Figure 28: Detail of US Army map of 1943 that shows the main road (red) cutting off the loop of the Nishava between Nis and Bela Palanka, as opposed to the route of the rail line in black.

Remesiana is known to have been fortified during the reign of Justinian, who also built or rebuilt a number of fortresses in the region that guarded the strategically important narrow passes along the Nishava.⁵³³ Albert of Aachen relates that Peter the Hermit, after his chastening defeat outside of Naissus, retreated with those few followers who remained with him into the mountains to regroup his forces with signals and horns.⁵³⁴ To rebuild their depleted stores, they then moved onto a nearby town, which Tyerman suggests was Remesiana, and there attempted to gather the harvest.⁵³⁵ The geography between Naissus and Remesiana closely matches this description, and Peter could have retreated into the Suva Planina range to the south of the Nishava. The heights here (approximately 1000 metres above sea level) would have provided a highly visible location from which to regroup before leading what remained of his army to the east.

Between Remesiana and the next *masnio*, *Turres*, the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* and the *Antonini Augusti* both list a distance of 18 Roman miles (approximately 30 kilometres). This fits almost exactly with the modern road distance between these two sites (Bela Palanka and Pirot), of 29.8 kilometres. The *Tabula Peutingerina*, however, gives a far different figure, 25 Roman miles (approximately 37 kilometres). These differences in stated distances, over a course of the *Via Militaris* that can be quite closely approximated on modern geographical maps, indicates how fraught with uncertainty this method can be, even when the location of *Turres* has been firmly established, by archaeological excavations, at the town of Pirot.

The station of *Turres* was heavily fortified in the Roman period, and ruins dated to the third century can still be located in Pirot today. It is possible that this fortress was the 'Quimedava' mentioned by Procopius, which Justinian repaired in the sixth century, before it fell to Slavic tribes, sometime in the seventh. It was recaptured and restored during the reign of Basil II, however its fate after 1185 is uncertain, and it most likely was abandoned. Archaeological excavations have uncovered a settlement on the site, containing Christian basilicas and *thermae*, covering a total area of nearly 100 hectares.⁵³⁶ Bertrandon de La Brocquière, passing the town in 1433, and claiming that the road leading through the region was '*tolerably good for horseback riding*', noted a small castle at the site, defended to the north by the Nishava River and to the south by a marsh.⁵³⁷ The Croatian diplomat, Antun Vrančić, who

⁵³³ Šašel, *Tabula imperii Romani: Naissus, Dyrrhachion-Scupi-Serdica-Thessalonike*, p. 108.

⁵³⁴ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, p. 27.

⁵³⁵ C. Tyerman, *God's War: a new history of the Crusades* (London, 2007), p. 97. Albert of Aachen does not specifically name which city that the pilgrims retreated to, only describing it as '*a certain city*', Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, p. 27.

⁵³⁶ Šašel, *Tabula imperii Romani: Naissus, Dyrrhachion-Scupi-Serdica-Thessalonike*, p. 128-9.

⁵³⁷ B. de La Brocquière, *Le Voyage d'Outremer*, p. 270-1.

passed through the town of Pirot in 1567, *en route* to Constantinople, noted the paved remains of a road that the native inhabitants of the region called the '*Trajan*'.⁵³⁸

The location of the next station, Meldiis, is not certain. The *Tabula Peutingerina* gives a distance of 24 Roman miles (35.5 km), whilst the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* and the *Antonini Augusti* give 31 and 30 miles respectively (44-45 km). The modern distance by road between Pirot and the next two largest towns along the route, Dimitrovgrad and Dragoman, is 27 and 46 kilometres respectively. Dimitrovgrad is mentioned by Hans Dernschwam as being a town on the route of the *Via Militaris*, and he also remarked that well preserved sections of the Roman road were still visible in this region.⁵³⁹ Dragoman would appear the most likely location for Meldiis, however the Bulgarian archaeologist Mitko Madzharov argues that it was located partly between the towns of Dragoman and Slivnitsa. In Madzharov's opinion Roman remains found near the railway station in modern day Dragoman are, therefore, not those of the *mansio* Meldiis, but rather of the *mutatio* Ballanstra that is listed in the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*.⁵⁴⁰

A potential problem with this interpretation is that would mean a distance between Tures and Meldiis of some 51 kilometres, or 34 Roman miles, through quite difficult terrain. Between Tures and Meldiis sits what is today known as the Dragoman Pass, a narrow valley of some four kilometres that follows one of the southern tributaries of the Nishava River, known as the Ezhevitsa (Figure 29).⁵⁴¹ This pass today delineates the Serbian-Bulgarian border, and was the site of a famous confrontation between Bulgarian and Serbian forces on November 16, 1885, as Bulgarian forces unsuccessfully attempted to halt a Serbian advance on Sofia in the narrow mountain valley, before defeating the Serbians shortly afterwards at the Battle of Slivnitsa (17-19 November, 1885).

⁵³⁸ Vrančić, *Monumenta Hungariae Historica VI. Scriptores*, p. 80.

⁵³⁹ Dernschwam, *Ein Fugger-Kaufmann im Osmanischen Reich*, p. 20.

⁵⁴⁰ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 75.

⁵⁴¹ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 238.



Figure 29: The Dragoman Pass. The *Via Militaris* ran along the side of the valley to the right of the modern road. The modern train line runs to its left.

One potential answer to this question may be provided in analysis of the road itself, and it is fortunate that in this region there are several stretches of preserved road surface, whilst on the outskirts of Dimitrovgrad a section of the original road was unearthed during construction of the trans-European highway, Corridor 10. Further excavations at the site revealed that the road in this location was eight

metres wide with a cobblestoned surface and dated to the late fourth century (Figure 30).⁵⁴² This indicates that the road was wider than the minimum 5.5 metre width proscribed for highways by Augustus, and reaffirms that in the late Roman Empire the *Via Militaris* was an extremely important strategic route, hence the magnitude of its construction. Dernschwam described the road sections he observed along the Nishava River in the sixteenth century as being an ‘old stone paved street’, and so wide ‘two wagons could pass each other’, indicating that in the mid-sixteenth century the road retained its impressive width in this region.⁵⁴³



Figure 30: Excavated section of the *Via Militaris* on the outskirts of Dimitrovgrad. Image courtesy of the World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/05/07/breaking-through-to-future-discovering-past-serbia/>

Some five kilometres to the south-east of this find, just across the Serbian-Bulgarian border, are located further exposed fragments of the road’s surface, on the northern bank of the Nishava, and the fringe of the Bulgarian village of Kalotina. These remains have not been the subject of excavations, and so their dimensions or origins are unclear, although these most likely are the remains of the Ottoman road surface. Alongside the remains of the road sits the Church of St Nicholas, which contains an inscription that dates its construction to the reign of the Bulgarian Emperor Ivan Alexander in the

⁵⁴² Lazic, ‘Via militaris - римски друм код Цариброда’, p. 70.

⁵⁴³ Dernschwam, *Ein Fugger-Kaufmann im Osmanischen Reich*, p. 18.

fourteenth century.⁵⁴⁴ Its location alongside the road suggests that this route was utilised during the late Middle Ages.

There are further clear remains of the *Via Militaris* between Kalotina and Dragoman, located slightly to the east of the modern road through the Dragoman Pass, the E-80, and running parallel to it. Running through a forested region, and then open farmland, before terminating at the edge of the Dragoman township itself, exists approximately four kilometres of unbroken road surface. In the forested region the road sits upon a steep embankment, which gradually declines before disappearing altogether as it enters the level field beyond, leaving behind just the paved road surface itself (Figure 31). The road is approximately eight metres wide, and consists of rough stones of irregular size. Furthermore, whilst the surface of the road uses extremely irregular stones, regular flagstones can also be seen used to mark the kerbs (see Figures 32-35). This road is again almost certainly of Ottoman origin, but owing to its location, the existence of an embankment within the Dragoman Pass, and the relative position of stations, most likely closely followed the same route of the earlier Roman road.

⁵⁴⁴ I. Biliarsky, *Word and Power in Medieval Bulgaria, East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450* (Leiden, 2011), p. 25.



Figure 31: The route of the road as it approaches modern Dragoman. The road (highlighted in red) bends to the left then, as it leaves the forest, bends to the right and enters open fields. The modern highway runs to the right of it, as does the rail line. Image captured via Google Earth.



Figure 32: Remains of the road in the Dragoman Pass, where it bends to the left in the above image. A steep embankment drops away to the left of the picture.



Figure 33: Exposed pavement of the road as it nears Dragoman.



Figure 34: Regular sized paving stones mark the kerb of the road.



Figure 35: The route of the road as it runs through fields near the town of Dragoman. The modern highway can be seen running parallel to the right.

On the southern edge of Dragoman, between it and the town of Slivnitsa, the road appears once more, crisscrossing the train lines several times before disappearing again at the town of Slivnitsa itself. Along its entire length it maintains a south-easterly course, in the direction of Sofia. In several places the road seems to have been overlaid by the, now largely abandoned, paved nineteenth century Bulgarian road that ran to Sofia. Again, the surface is comprised of rough, uneven stones and is approximately eight metres wide. At times it sits upon a large embankment, but in other sections the embankment is entirely missing (see Figures 36-38). This may be explained by the Ottomans having deliberately broken up embankments of the original road to provide building material to repair the original surface or build a new road. The remains that exist today are again almost certainly those of the Ottoman road, and its route matches quite closely that of the road in this region traced in the early twentieth century, in particular in its frequent crossing of the railway lines.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴⁵ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 238.



Figure 36: Overgrown remains of road near Slivnitsa. A steep embankment is present. The tree line on the right follows the course of the modern rail line.



Figure 37: Exposed stones on the overgrown surface of the road.



Figure 38: Further remains of the road as it passes through a field. The embankment is now completely absent.

The station of Meldiis may well then conform to a series of ruins situated to the north of this road surface, on the outskirts of the town of Slivnitsa, and alongside the protected marshland Aldomirovsko. These ruins have not been excavated, although locals refer to them as a ‘Roman station’, and they match with the position of the station Meldiis, as stated by Madzharov, as being between Dragoman and Slivnitsa (Figure 39).⁵⁴⁶ Just to the north of these ruins are the remains of a Thracian shrine to Sabazios, which was later converted into a Christian church.⁵⁴⁷ Despite the distance between Pirot and this location, given the evident width of the road in this region, and the straightness of the route after it exits the Dragoman Pass, it is not unreasonable that this might well have been location of the station Meldiis.

⁵⁴⁶ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 75.

⁵⁴⁷ Hoddinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity*, p. 179.



Figure 39: Possible remains of a Roman station located to the north of the road, on the edge of the Aldomirovsko Marsh.

A final station existed before Serdica, the *mutatio* Scretisca, located on the fringes of the modern town of Kostinbrod, some 15 kilometres from the city centre of Sofia. Scretisca is the one of the few stations along the *Via Militaris* within modern Bulgaria that has been the subject of extensive archaeological study.⁵⁴⁸ The station was excavated in the 1990s, and revealed to consist of nine rooms situated around an open patio, with a total area of 730 square metres. It is thought the three rooms on the eastern wing were used by the personnel who serviced the station, with the six rooms and patio on the western side catering for travellers and their mounts. It was found that the station went through a number of different stages of development, originally built sometime between the years 317 and 324, further added to by Constantine, before ceasing to function around the time of the Second Goth War (377-8). A section of the *Via Militaris* unearthed here was measured as being 6.8 metres wide.

⁵⁴⁸ V. Dinchev, *Late Roman and early Byzantine residence Scretisca, settlement Kratiskara: Archaeological excavations in the area Gradishteto in 1990-1994* (Sofia, 2003).

Located approximately one kilometre to the east of the station, on the banks of the Belichka River, a tributary of the Iskar, is a large Roman residence, known as *Villa Scretisca*. This *villa*, which covers an area of some 15,000 square metres, dates to the late Roman period, probably the early third century, and contains a number of buildings arranged around a central peristylum yard (see Figures 40-42). During the reign of Constantine the *villa* was expanded and adorned with intricate mosaics, and it may have acted as an imperial residence when Constantine was visiting Serdica, as well as hosting some of the bishops who attended the Council of Serdica, that was held c. 343 AD. However it was clearly not an urban residence, and instead likely formed the nucleus of an extensive estate, and thus represents an example of a *villa rustica*.⁵⁴⁹



Figure 40: Part of the remains of Villa Scretisca today.

⁵⁴⁹ Dinchev, *Late Roman and early Byzantine residence Scretisca, settlement Kratiskara*, p. 111.

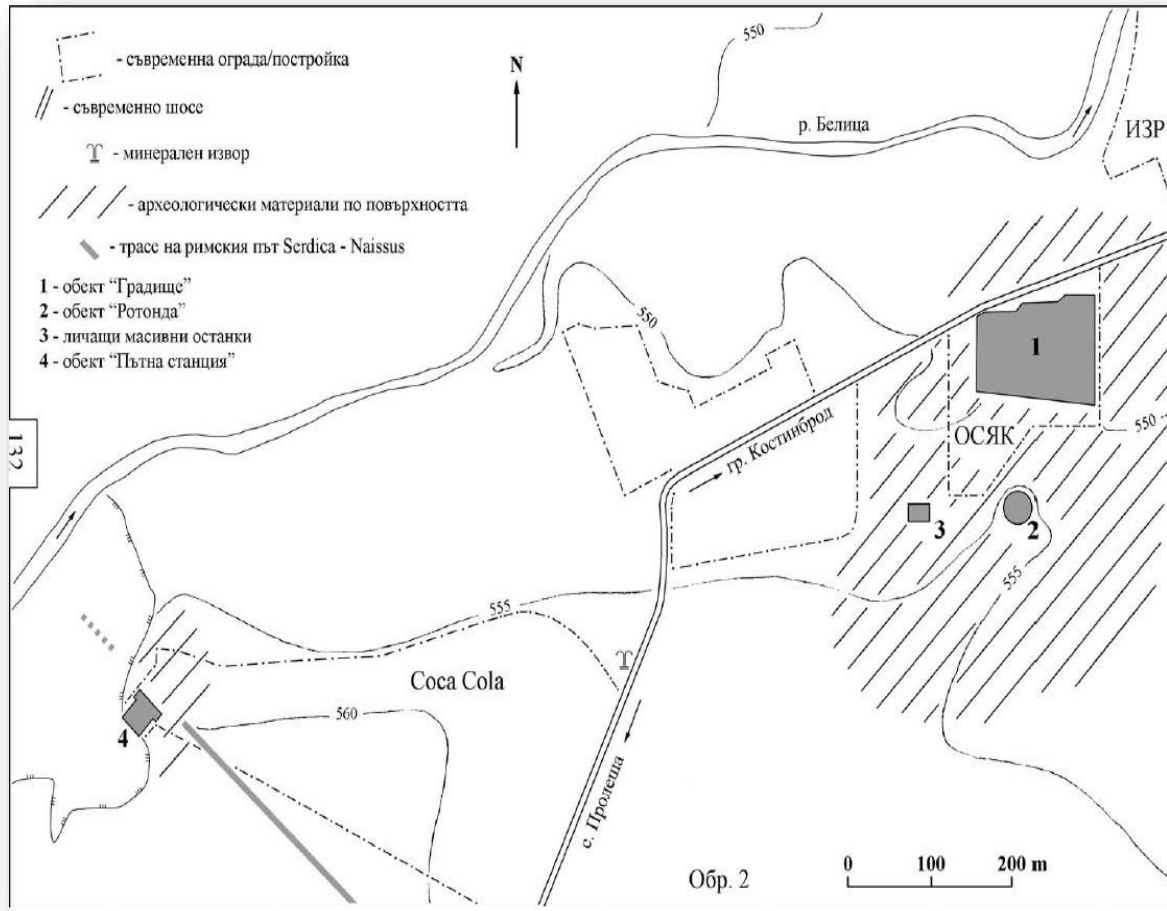


Figure 41: Plan of Scretisca. The station is shown in the south-west corner (4), inside the perimeter of a Coca Cola bottling plant, with the larger villa (1) to the east. The route of the excavated section of the *Via Militaris* is also shown in the south-west corner. From Dinchev, *Late Roman and early Byzantine residence Scretisca, settlement Kratiskara*, p. 132.



Figure 42: Part of the remains of Scretisca can be seen in the extended section at the bottom left of the Coca Cola bottling plant. Image captured via Google Earth.

After being destroyed at the same time as the neighbouring station in the late fourth century, the *villa* was restored during the reign of Justinian, when a fortress was built on the site. The fortress contained three round turrets and a single gate in the northern wall that was protected by a rectangular turret.⁵⁵⁰ It has been identified with the location of Cratiscara, mentioned by Procopius, and it appears to have survived till the late sixth century, when all evidence of inhabitation ceases.⁵⁵¹

Between Naissus and Serdica it is possible therefore to trace the route of the *Via Militaris* with a great deal of confidence. Much of the Serbian portion of this journey is through narrow river valleys carved by the Nishava River, while in Bulgaria the existence of the remains of stations, as well as the road surface itself, means that even over open land the route can be traced with some accuracy. These Bulgarian remains likely owe their existence, in part, to the 50 mile wide exclusion zone that covered the Serbian-Bulgarian border during the Soviet period which prevented large scale urban development in the region, and even today the area remains largely uneconomically developed and predominantly

⁵⁵⁰ Dinchev, *Late Roman and early Byzantine residence Scretisca, settlement Kratiskara*, p. 118.

⁵⁵¹ Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, p. 228-9.

rural in character.⁵⁵² Certainly this region is far better represented in terms of surviving medieval churches than anywhere else in Bulgaria, and the lack of development similarly may have helped preserve the road surface in this area.

The surviving stretches of road suggest that in this region the *Via Militaris* was of impressive proportions, consistently near eight metres wide, and the route of the road between Dragoman and Sofia is almost completely straight, without very little deviation. As it traversed the Sofia plain it kept close to the foothills of the Stara Planina, which provided protection along its northern flank (Figure 43). How closely the remains of the road located here relate to the medieval route is unclear, as much, if not all, of what exists today of the road would be of Ottoman origin. Jireček noted that in the late nineteenth century the road was very well preserved between the towns of Pirot and Sofia, and comments that he believed that the road-bed of the original Roman road was used in its reconstruction by the Ottomans, which likely occurred sometime after the middle of the sixteenth century.⁵⁵³

⁵⁵² R. Koroutchev, 'The Bulgarian-Serbian border region: problems and perspectives', *Klagenfurter Geographische Schriften*, 29 (2013), p. 128.

⁵⁵³ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 26.

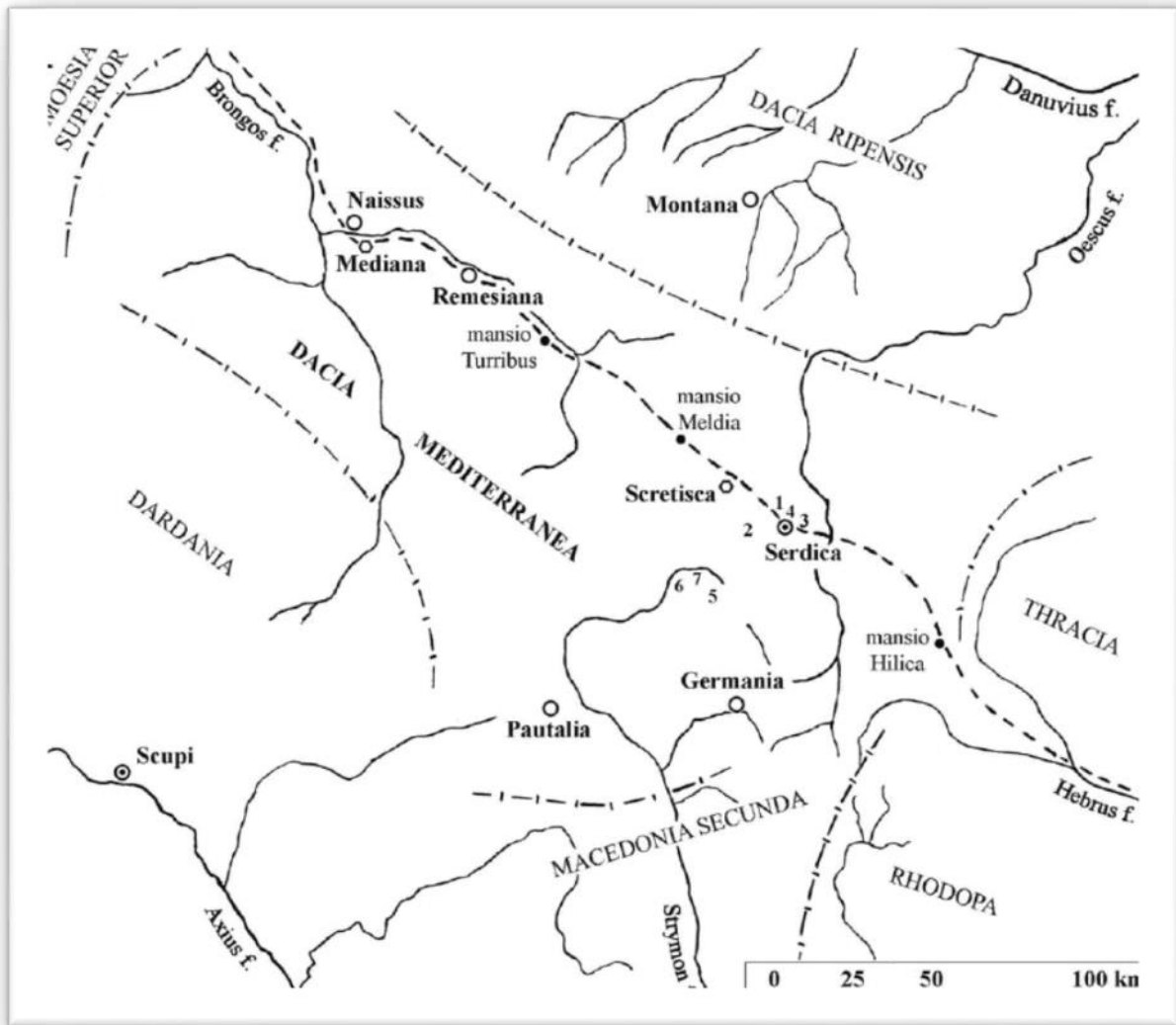


Figure 43: Route of the *Via Militaris* between Naissus and Serdica. From Dinchev, *Late Roman and early Byzantine residence Scretisca, settlement Kratiskara*, p. 133.

For the medieval traveller the journey from Naissus to Serdica was a difficult one, although perhaps less so than the road south from Branichevo. Naissus was located in a fertile valley that meant it was able to provide the market facilities that were so vitally needed to sustain crusading forces who had depleted their supplies traversing the Bulgarian Forest. Beyond Naissus, however, things were more difficult; the roads were in poor condition, provisions were difficult to attain, and the narrow passes along the Nishava left armies exposed to ambush. It is likely that this is the region described by Michael Attaleiates in his account of Emperor Michael IV's campaign in Illyrikon, which from Serdica was only accessed through narrow passes, and which had '*for many years resisted previous emperors precisely*

because it is so difficult to exit from its defiles'.⁵⁵⁴ John Kinnamos likewise described the region from the Danube as far as Serdica as being difficult country, owing to the many high and inaccessible mountains that lined the route.⁵⁵⁵

The area as a whole was likely very sparsely populated from the seventh century onwards. In the mid-eleventh century a large number of defeated Pechenegs were settled along the road between Naissus and Serdica by Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, probably to garrison the fortresses along the route, but it is not clear how successful this proved to be.⁵⁵⁶ Peter the Hermit's hope to forage for food to replace that which was lost outside of Naissus proved in vain and the plain of Serdica, being likewise sparsely populated, did not offer much opportunity for reprovisioning either unless extraordinary efforts were made beforehand, as occurred prior to the arrival of the contingents of the Second Crusade. It was realistically not till the Maritsa Valley was reached that conditions began to improve.

The passage of the Third Crusade between Naissus and Serdica, in particular, proved an extremely hazardous affair. Whilst negotiating the narrow Nishava Valley the crusaders were ambushed several times, with barricades thrown across the road to impede their path.⁵⁵⁷ *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg* relates that between Naissus and Strelitz, which can be taken to mean Serdica, the crusaders negotiated two passes. In the first they suffered serious losses to their baggage, whilst in the second a '*great crowd of looters and robbers*' was put to flight with minimal casualties.⁵⁵⁸ The lack of detail in the source leaves it unclear as to where these two passes were located exactly. It can be surmised, however, that the first pass was perhaps the Nishava Gorge, whilst the second was either found near Pirot, or was the Dragoman Pass.

The *Historia de Expeditione*, meanwhile, describes the road from Naissus as '*difficult and uneven*' and that furthermore it afforded great opportunity for '*enemy Greeks and Vlachs*' to launch ambushes from dense thickets alongside the road.⁵⁵⁹ It narrates how Count Henry I of Sayn, who was '*with his men marching in front of the emperor because of the extraordinary difficulty of the road*' was ambushed but managed to drive his attackers off. It also describes how an ill knight, who was being carried in a litter, was set upon but managed also to set the bandits to flight. These examples show how the bandits sought to target isolated parties within Barbarossa's army, either those who marched ahead or behind the main columns.

⁵⁵⁴ Attaleiates, *The History*, p. 15.

⁵⁵⁵ Kinnamos, *The Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus*, p. 61.

⁵⁵⁶ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 90.

⁵⁵⁷ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 65-7.

⁵⁵⁸ Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, p. 149-50.

⁵⁵⁹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 66-7.

The sources further make clear that the ambushers targeted the baggage train and foragers in particular. The *Historia peregrinorum* tells how ‘*certain men who were marching without proper care fell into the hands of the enemy, by whom they were plundered, two knights were killed, and many others who were leading carts were mortally wounded.*’⁵⁶⁰ The *Historia de Expeditione* relates how the ambushers constantly harassed the crusaders, ‘*attacking us from the flanks along the mountain slopes*’ and launching night time raids.⁵⁶¹ The rugged terrain through which the Nishava River winds would have afforded numerous opportunities to prepare ambushes, and the sources suggest that the brigands made great use of the mountain heights to launch attacks down their slopes upon the vulnerable flanks of the crusader column.

In order to combat these attacks detachments of crossbowmen and knights were deployed to guard the vulnerable flanks of the columns.⁵⁶² These precautions, the constant attacks, and the poor condition of the road, slowed the crusader’s progress to a crawl, and it took fourteen days to cover the distance between Naissus and Serdica.⁵⁶³ By way of comparison, Odo of Deuil claimed that it took only four days for the forces of Louis VII to cover the same distance during the passage of the Second Crusade in 1147.⁵⁶⁴ In 1585 the English traveller, Captain Henry Austell, took five days to cover this distance, and noted the region was very sparsely populated.⁵⁶⁵ Peter Mundy took four days to make the journey, and described the road as ‘*very troublesome and wearisome by reason of the rocky, stony way*’.⁵⁶⁶ He also noted that travellers in the narrow passages through the mountains were frequently the target of thieves, indicating that the region retained its unsavoury reputation amongst travellers.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁰ *Historia peregrinorum*, p. 136-7.

⁵⁶¹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 66-7.

⁵⁶² *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 66.

⁵⁶³ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 67.

⁵⁶⁴ Odo of Deuil, *De profectioe Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 33.

⁵⁶⁵ H. Austell, ‘The voyage of M. Henry Austell by Venice to Ragusa, and thence over-land to Constantinople: and from thence through Moldavia, Polonia, Silesia, and Germany into England, Anno 1586’, in R. Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation - Volume 05: Central and Southern Europe* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 320.

⁵⁶⁶ Mundy, *Itinerarium Mundi*, p. 66.

⁵⁶⁷ Mundy, *Itinerarium Mundi*, p. 66.

11.4: Serdica

The city of Serdica is located in an extremely advantageous setting. The broad Sofia plain is approximately 75 kilometres wide and well-watered by numerous rivers, the largest of which is the Iskar, and is surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges; the Sredna Gora, Rhodope and Rila. To the south of the city, opposite Mount Vitoshka, runs the Struma River, which provides an access route south to the Aegean.

In the late Roman period the city of Serdica was a large and prosperous one. Constantine the Great often resided in the city, and between 317 and 330 he issued large numbers of laws, letters and rescripts whilst there. It was in Serdica, for example, in early 330, he wrote to Valentine, the Consul of Numidia, on the issue of the Donatist schism. The city contained an amphitheatre, public baths, basilica, and an extensive circuit of walls. Constantine himself would famously consider the city as the site of his new capital, before ultimately deciding upon Byzantium.

The remains of the Roman city can be seen in Sofia today, in particular the amphitheatre. The northern and eastern city gates, which were built by Justinian, have also been extensively excavated. The main road running to the south-east of the city, that once formed part of *Via Militaris*, can be traced from the eastern gate, which is today overshadowed by the old communist headquarters (Figure 44). The route of this road is today covered by the modern highway, and largest boulevard in the city, which ultimately connects Sofia to Plovdiv. This road has retained its identity as part of the route leading towards Constantinople, and is named Tsarigradsko shose, literally the 'Istanbul Road'.



Figure 44: Remains of the eastern city gates in Sofia, inside a modern subway station.

Like Naissus, Serdica was sacked by the Huns, in 447, although the historian Priscus claimed the damage it suffered was only minor, and was then restored by Justinian, who improved its fortifications, the remains of which can be seen today. According to uncovered inscriptions the walls of Serdica were repaired, and pentangular bastions erected, between 578-80 AD during the reign of Tiberius Constantinus II, and the city's water system was also repaired at this time (Figure 45).⁵⁶⁸ During the seventh century, however, the city appears to have entered into a long decline. Its subsequent history during this period is very difficult to trace, and it is not clear if the city fell to Slavic and Avar attacks in the seventh and eighth centuries, or if it remained in Byzantine hands. Owing to the repair work of the previous century though, the fortifications would have been in good repair by the time of the Slavic invasions. Excavations of the St. Sophia Church, which was located outside the

⁵⁶⁸ Biernacka-Lubanska, *The Roman and early-Byzantine fortifications of lower Moesia and northern Thrace*, p. 219.

walls built by Justinian, indicate it remained in use until the beginning of the ninth century, suggesting that at least a small Christian population had therefore remained at the site.⁵⁶⁹

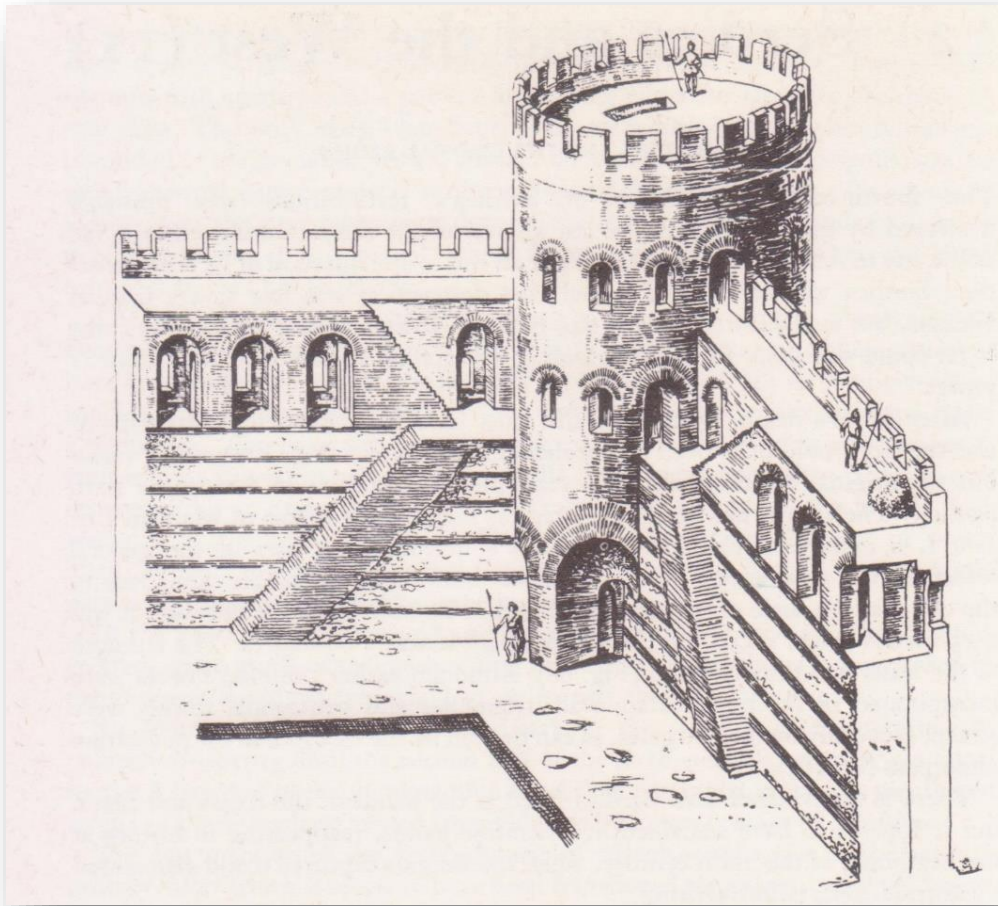


Figure 45: Reconstruction of an early Byzantine corner tower at Serdica, from Hoddinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity*, p. 171.

The Bulgar Khan Krum seized the city, after a long siege, in 809, but then retired before the advancing army of the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus.⁵⁷⁰ Theophanes states that after retaking the city Nicephorus contemplated rebuilding it, but was opposed in this by the army, who would have been required to undertake the construction work.⁵⁷¹ Whether this means the walls had been destroyed by Krum, or instead refers to general destruction in the city is not clear. Theophanes states that a large number of private citizens, and a garrison numbering 6,000 soldiers, were treacherously killed after

⁵⁶⁹ Howard-Johnston, 'Urban continuity in the Balkans in the Early Middle Ages', p. 247-8.

⁵⁷⁰ Theophanes, *Chronicle*, p. 165-6.

⁵⁷¹ Theophanes, *Chronicle*, p. 166.

the defenders had agreed to terms, indicating widespread devastation.⁵⁷² Nicephorus subsequently withdrew from the city, and it must have therefore been quickly retaken by the Bulgarians, or was captured by them at a later date, for it was the subject of a Byzantine siege by Emperor Basil II in 986. However the fortifications of the city were able to resist the Byzantine siege engines for nearly a month, ultimately forcing the Byzantine army to withdraw, suggesting that the walls had either never been destroyed by Krum, or had been extensively rebuilt by the Bulgars sometime afterwards. The city was finally retaken by Basil II in 1001, and remained under Byzantine control until it was seized by Tsar Ivan Asen I in 1191.

Serdica was not an especially rich town in the crusading period. The Franks received a market here during the passage of the Second Crusade, although according to Odo of Deuil this was only on account of the careful preparations made by its governor.⁵⁷³ In comparison, when Frederick Barbarossa reached the city on August 13, 1189, the town was described as being '*empty and lacking through poverty in all human comfort*'.⁵⁷⁴ The crusaders, who had been promised market facilities at the town, were bitterly disappointed when no such services were to be found. *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg* also states that the crusader force suffered greatly here through a shortage of wine.⁵⁷⁵

As seen above, the ability of the local population to agriculturally exploit the surrounding land was highly deficient in the late twelfth century, and it is likely for this reason the city was never able to recover either its former size or prominence. Serdica owed much of its subsequent fame to the thermal and mineral springs found on the site. These springs, with a temperature of between 20 to 50 degrees, formed the basis of a number of bathhouses, and during the Ottoman period the city became a major balneological centre. As a result, whilst the city retained its regional status during the Ottoman period, largely owing to its location astride the main road to Constantinople and its rich mineral springs, it was by the late nineteenth century little more than a provincial town, and far smaller than the far more populous Philippopolis to the east.

There is some confusion between the three itineraries as to the stations that lay between Serdica and Philippopolis. The *Tabula Peutingerina* lists Sarto, Egirka, Zyrmis, and Bessapora, the *Antonini Augusti* names the stations Bagaraca, Helice, Lissas, and Bessapara, while the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* names Buragara, Hilica, Bona Mansio, and Basapare. The differences across the three itineraries has caused no small amount of controversy as to where the stations lay along this important section of the road,

⁵⁷² Hoddinott interprets this as meaning Krum must have levelled the walls of the city, Hoddinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity: an archaeological introduction*, p. 269, as does Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, p. 96.

⁵⁷³ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 45.

⁵⁷⁴ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 67.

⁵⁷⁵ Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, p. 150.

as the *Via Militaris* crossed the Sredna Gora mountains and entered the Maritsa Valley. However a general agreement of four *mansio* between Serdica and Philippopolis indicate it took four days travel between the two cities, and this is reinforced by the sources. Odo of Deuil claimed it took four days to travel between the two,⁵⁷⁶ and in the eighteenth century Lady Mary Montagu also covered this distance in four days.⁵⁷⁷

Owing to the confusion surrounding the locations of stations in this region, it is better to begin with the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* that lists both the larger *mansio* and the smaller *mutatio*. The first such station after Serdica was the *mutatio* Extuomnes, located eight Roman miles from the city. It is believed Extuomnes was located in what is now the outer suburb of Sofia, Gorubylana. Observations at this site in 1947, at what was then a small village on the outskirts of the city, detail remains of a possible road side station on the route of the modern Tsarigradsko shose, and near the grounds of the summer palace of the nineteenth century Bulgarian monarchs, known as Vrana (Figure 46).⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁶ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 33.

⁵⁷⁷ Lady M. W. Montagu, *The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 159.

⁵⁷⁸ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 80.

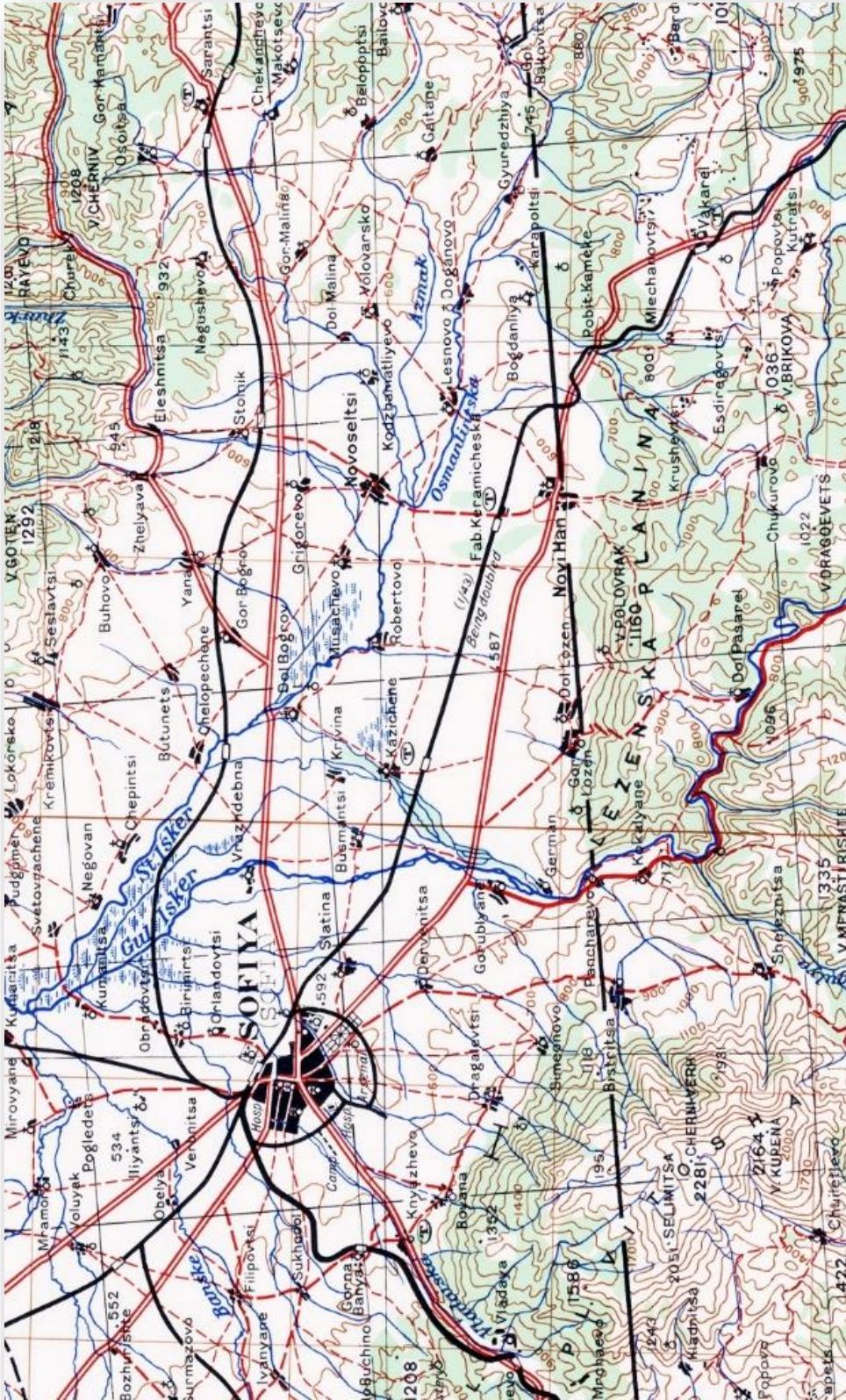


Figure 46: Sofia to Vakarel from US Army Map of 1943. Gorubylana is a small village to the south-east of Sofia.

Both the *Antonini Augusti* and the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* name the next station along the route as Bagaraca (or Buragara in the latter). The *Tabula Peutingerina*, however, lists Sarto as the next station, a site the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* also mentions (as Sparata), but only as a *mutatio*. The locations of Bagaraca and Sarto are argued to be in the towns of Novi Han and Vakarel respectively, but there is little archaeological evidence to support either of these arguments.⁵⁷⁹ Novi Han is a small village located in the Sofia plain, approximately 25 kilometres east of Sofia. This fits well with the 16 and 18 Roman mile distances listed in the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* and the *Antonini Augusti* respectively.

Continuing east the *Via Militaris* then begins its ascent of the western slopes of the Sredna Gora Mountains through the Vakarel Pass. The town of Vakarel itself marks the highest point which the *Via Militaris* attains across its entire length; 880 metres above sea level. It is approached by a deep, winding valley that is today followed by both the train line and the modern 'Trakia' Highway, as well as the old Sofia-Plovdiv road, the E-80. The climb to Vakarel is not particularly steep however, as the Sofia plain itself is 500 metres above sea level. The approach is, therefore, not a difficult one, although the slopes of the Sredna Gora are densely forested, making deviations from the route unfeasible.

The distance from Sofia to Vakarel is approximately 39 kilometres (26 Roman miles). The *Tabula Peutingeriana* lists the distance between the two stations as 20 Roman miles, although that is, as has been seen, often not a reliable figure. Madzharov postulates that the stations of Bagaraca and Sarto may possibly be the same location, and that perhaps the confusion is the result of errors made in the copying of the itineraries, although he concedes that no real answer will be found until archaeological excavations are able to pinpoint the location of the Roman stations in this region.⁵⁸⁰ The lack of recorded archaeological remains makes tracing the route of the *Via Militaris* in this region difficult, although its progression across the Sofia plain and the climb towards Vakarel probably mirrors very closely the route taken by the Old Sofia-Plovdiv road, today the E-80. Hans Dernschwam claimed that in 1553 the Roman road was well preserved and still in use in the Vakarel Pass, consisting of well-formed and carefully ordered stones.⁵⁸¹

From Vakarel the road emerges onto the Ihtiman Plateau, a large open expanse approximately 600-700 metres above sea level, and typical of summits in the Sredna Gora range. The road declines from Vakarel some 200 metres over a course which was described by the Geographical Section of the British Admiralty in 1920 as being wooded country where the road descended steeply, and furthermore the most difficult section of the entire route as it navigated Bulgaria.⁵⁸² As the road crossed the Ihtiman

⁵⁷⁹ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 81-2.

⁵⁸⁰ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 82.

⁵⁸¹ Dernschwam, *Ein Fugger-Kaufmann im Osmanischen Reich*, p. 28.

⁵⁸² Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 256.

Plateau it ran close to the northern slopes of the Stara Planina, which suggests that it probably followed a route quite close to that which the old Sofia-Plovdiv road follows. Bertrandon de La Brocquière described the region as '*a plain six miles long by two broad – then to a forest sixteen miles in length – then to another great plain wholly shut in by mountains, well peopled by Bulgarians and having a river run through it.*'⁵⁸³ The agreeable climate and well-watered environment has allowed traditional agricultural practices to flourish in this region, and it is also the site of Bulgaria's first golf course (Figure 47).



Figure 47: View south over the Ihtiman Plateau, with the line of the Sredna Gora in the middle distance, and the Rhodope Mountains behind.

The *Tabula Peutingerina* lists the next station as Egirka, at a distance of 17 Roman miles (approximately 25 kilometres) from Sarto. Jireček identified Egirka with the modern town of Ihtiman (Figure 48).⁵⁸⁴ However Ihtiman is only 16 kilometres from Vakarel, which makes this identification doubtful. Madzharov, however, argues that while there is a notable discrepancy in distances, the

⁵⁸³ B. de La Brocquière, *Le Voyage d'Outremer*, p. 269.

⁵⁸⁴ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 29.

location of Ihtiman fits well with the distance of 34 Roman miles (50 kilometres) between Serdica and Egirka stated in the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*.⁵⁸⁵ The modern road distance between Sofia and Ihtiman is 54 kilometres.

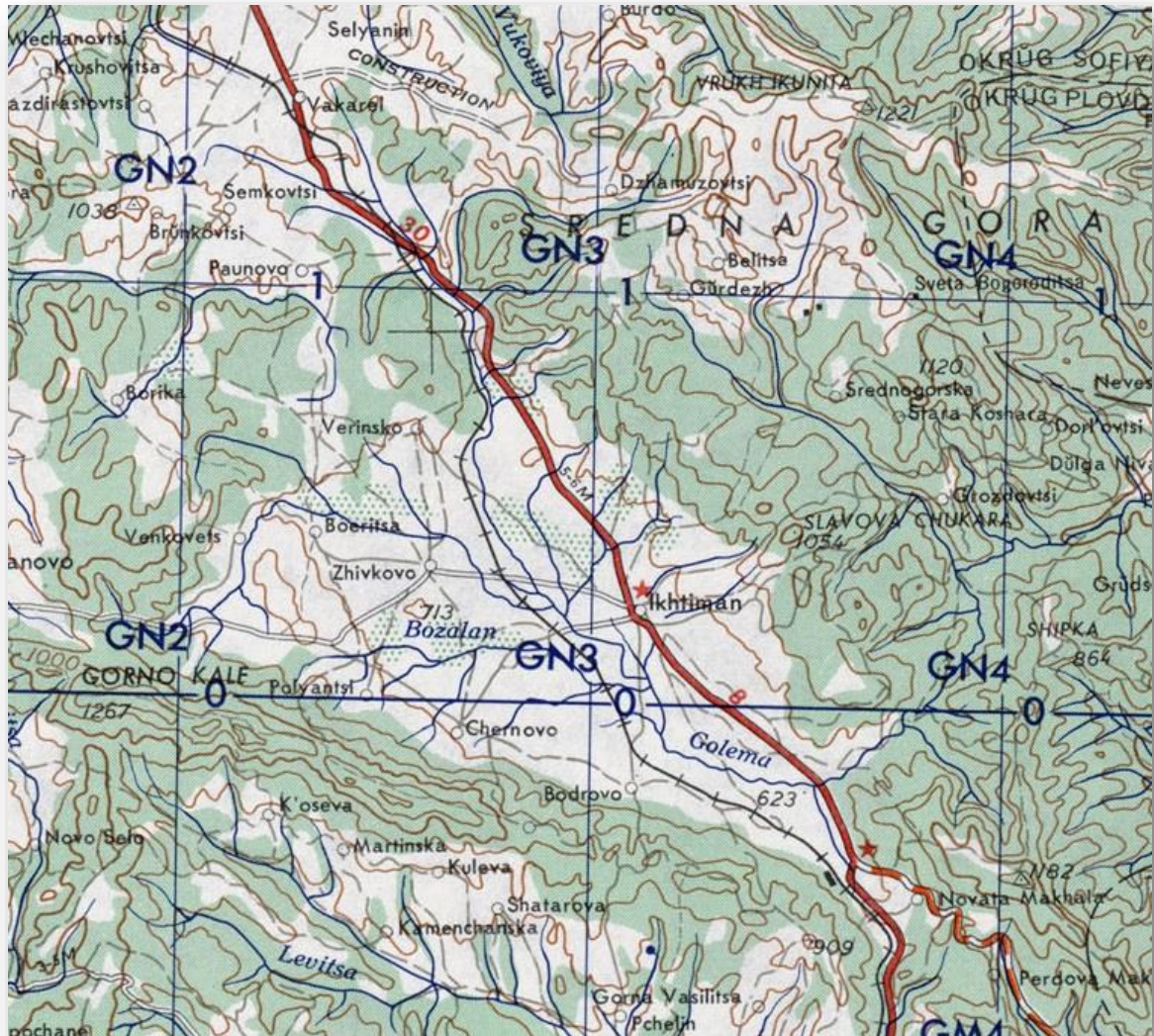


Figure 48: The route of the Old Sofia-Plovdiv road across the Ihtiman Plateau. From US Army Map Service, Western Europe, 1959.

It is quite likely that a station, either by the name of Egirka or Hilice was located in the environs of modern Ihtiman. The passage of the Succi Pass, which began immediately after, was a difficult proposition and it would have required at least a full day's march to negotiate. Ruins located in the

⁵⁸⁵ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 81.

southern part of the modern town are thought to be the remains of the Roman station at this site, but this has yet to be verified.⁵⁸⁶

11.5: The Succi Pass

The Succi Pass, or Pass of St Basil, is the most famous section of the entire route of the *Via Militaris*, and its most formidable geographical obstacle. The word ‘Succi’ in the Thracian language can mean a crack, or a gorge. Ammianus Marcellinus stated that the region, ‘*being in the form of a crescent, resembles a splendid theatre; it is bound in the west by mountains, on the abrupt summit of which are the thickly wooded passes of the Succi, which separate Thrace from Dacia*’.⁵⁸⁷ He claimed that whilst previously the pass had been an obscure one, through Roman engineering ‘*it was opened even for the passage of carts; and yet it could sometimes be so closed as to check the attempts of great and mighty leaders*’.⁵⁸⁸ The fourth century theologian, Philostorgius, whilst describing the campaign of Alaric I against the city of Constantinople, compared the narrowness of the pass to that of Thermopylae.⁵⁸⁹ The *Historia de Expeditione* describes it as the furthest and strongest pass of Bulgaria (*clusae ultimae et firmissimae Bulgariae*).⁵⁹⁰ In the Ottoman period the pass was referred to by travellers as the Kapu Durbent, the ‘Narrow Gate’.

The Succi Pass is formed by the south-eastern course of the Yavoritza River, a tributary of the Topolnitsa River which is, itself, a tributary of the Maritsa. The Ihtiman Plateau sits approximately 650-700 metres above sea level as it enters the pass, and it then slowly descends to the Maritsa Valley, of an altitude of 250-300 metres, over the course of approximately 25-30 kilometres. On either side of the valley rise steep, heavily forested ridges, reaching 1000 metres to the south of the valley, and 1200 metres to the north, narrowing the route to a small area on either side of the river. Despite its narrow confines, the pass is therefore not an overly steep one. Indeed, Lady Mary Wortley, after making the trip through the pass would later remark that ‘*the precipes (sic) were not so terrible as I had heard them represented*’.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁶ M. Biernacka-Lubanska, *The Roman and Early-Byzantine fortifications of Lower Moesia and Northern Thrace*, p. 248.

⁵⁸⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri*, trans. J. C. Rolfe. *Ammianus Marcellinus*, Vol. 3, p. 23.

⁵⁸⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri*, trans. J. C. Rolfe. *Ammianus Marcellinus*, Vol. 2, p. 135.

⁵⁸⁹ Philostorgius, *Church History*, trans. P. R. Amidon (Atlanta, 2007), p. 58.

⁵⁹⁰ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 68.

⁵⁹¹ Lady M. W. Montagu, *The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 168.

In order to measure the approximate steepness of the pass, the author measured its elevation profile by hiking the route with a Garmin eTrex 30 handheld GPS, and then uploading the co-ordinates into Google Earth. The data obtained is not an exact depiction of the pass, as the modern road detours via the remains of Soneium discussed below, which forms the central peak in the following graph. However even taking this into consideration, over the course of its 30 kilometre length, the average gradient of the pass is approximately 4.8%, whilst its steepest slope, as it enters the Maritsa Valley, is approximately 7-8% (Figure 49). Even given the simplistic manner in which this information was collected, and the inaccuracies inherent in topographic data of this kind, it is abundantly clear that the slope along this section of the pass was much less than the 15-20% gradients found along similar sections of the *Via Egnatia*. Gradients of 5-7% are navigable for wagons drawn by draft animals, although it is at the upper limit of their endurance, and for steeper gradients than this loads would have needed to be reduced, or the wagons unloaded completely.⁵⁹²

⁵⁹² W. G. Harger & E. A. Bonney, *Handbook for highway engineers: containing information ordinarily used in the design and construction of roads warranting an expenditure of \$5000 to \$30,000 per mile* (New York, 1919), p. 11-23.

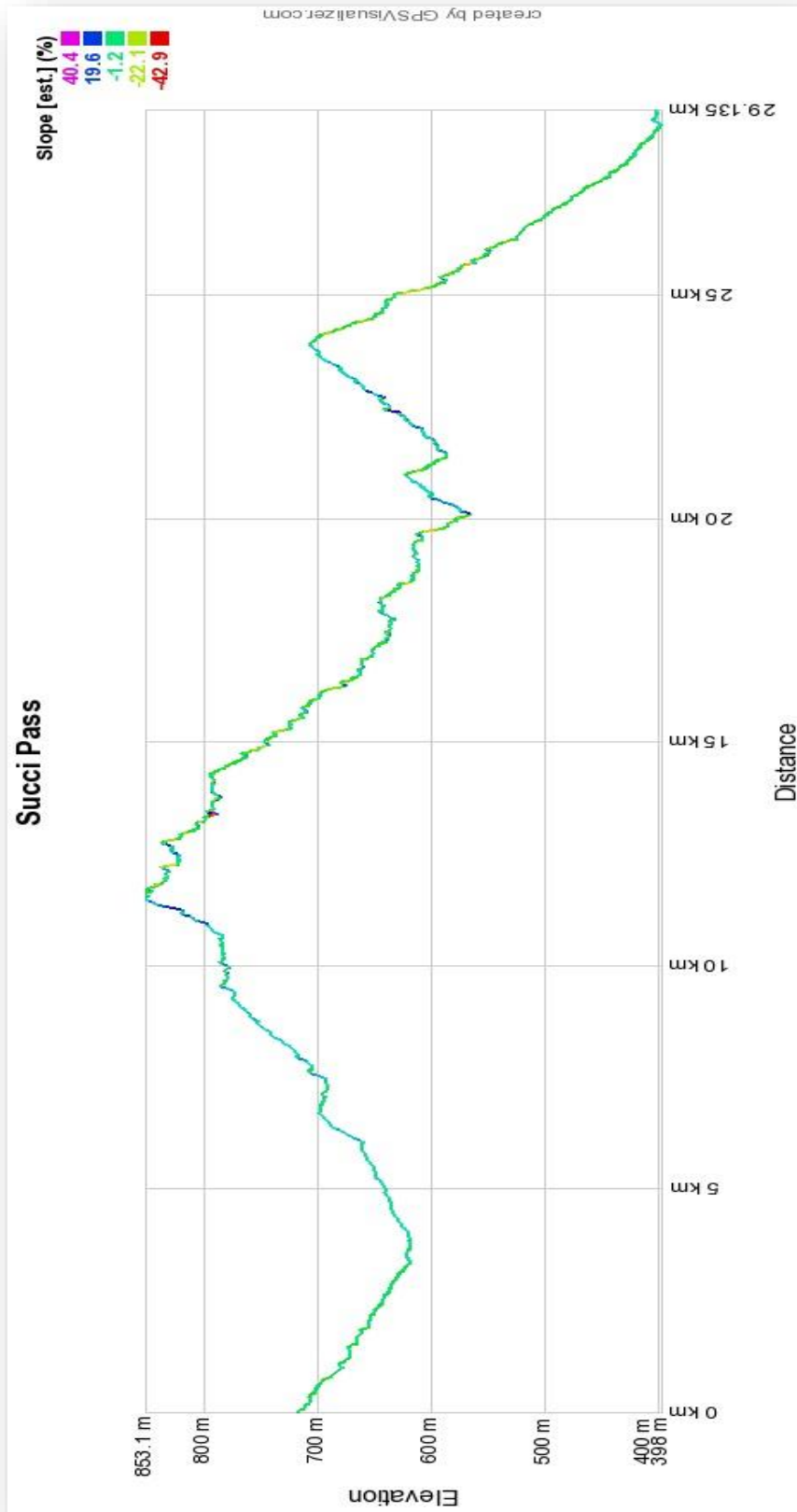


Figure 49: Elevation profile, captured by GPS of the descent through the Succia Pass. Elevation profile generated via GPSvisualazer.com

Owing to the narrowness of the pass, and its location along the main route leading to Constantinople, the Succi Pass is regarded as one of the most important strategic sites within the Roman Empire, a natural chokepoint where the advance of an enemy army could be checked.⁵⁹³ The pass was consequently the focal point of numerous campaigns, and in particular was defended in an attempt to stop the invading Gothic and Hunnic forces from invading Thrace in the fourth and fifth centuries. Constantine occupied the pass during his campaign against Licinius, as did the *Augustus* Julian during his conflict with Constantius in 361. The entrance of the valley was further protected by a fortress that can be identified as the *mutatio* Soneium named in the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, and was known in Byzantine sources as Stoponion (Figure 50).⁵⁹⁴ Jireček, visiting the site in the nineteenth century, described the fortress as having a quadrangular form, with a length and width of about 40 steps, and a round tower on its southern side.⁵⁹⁵



Figure 50: The remains of Soneium, overlooking the Succi Pass which runs along the valley below.

⁵⁹³ H. Eton, *Warfare in Roman Europe, AD 350-425* (Oxford, 1996), p. 231.

⁵⁹⁴ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, p. 313.

⁵⁹⁵ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 30-1.

The fortress on this site has been extensively excavated over a number of years, and it has subsequently been found to be a massive construction encompassing some 1800 square metres, dating to the early Byzantine period.⁵⁹⁶ Construction of the walls and towers was found to be largely of brick, utilising the *opus mixtum* technique of bricks existing in bands of five rows. The main entrance was in the north-east wall, and was protected by two pentagonal towers (Figure 51). It is thought that the fortress was built sometime between 491 and 582, most likely during the reign of Anastasius. It is more difficult to determine when it was abandoned, however, and crusader sources of the late twelfth century (see the paragraph below) suggest the fortifications were rebuilt ahead of their arrival, suggesting it had been uninhabited for some time.⁵⁹⁷



Figure 51: Remains of Soneium today.

Accompanying this fortress was another across the valley that blocked the passage of the road itself. This was the literal ‘Gates of Trajan’. The gate is mentioned by some travellers, but not by others,

⁵⁹⁶ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 85.

⁵⁹⁷ See Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos) Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, Vol. 6, p. 464-5.

whilst no trace of any such fortification remains today. The *Historia de Expeditione* tells that the Byzantines blocked the road with trees and ‘an extraordinary quantity of rocks’, and they ‘had fortified the ancient passes of St Basil by renewing the towers and bastions in defiance of the pilgrims of Christ.’⁵⁹⁸ It is also mentioned during John Hunyadi’s campaign against the Ottomans in 1443, where the pass, and its gate, played a prominent role during his march on Philippopolis.⁵⁹⁹

Bertrandon de La Brocquière curiously fails to mention it at all whilst traversing the pass in 1433; however he does note that travellers were frequently ambushed by bandits in the region.⁶⁰⁰ Hans Dernschwam similarly fails to mention the gate, but does remark that up into the mountains, and then down again, existed a ‘wide paved road’.⁶⁰¹ Peter Mundy, though, in 1620, noted ‘a great, high, ruinous Arch of brick’ in the pass.⁶⁰² Lady Wortley also mentions the gate as still standing in 1716, stating ‘We passed near the piece of an arch, which is commonly called Trajan’s Gate, from a supposition, that he made it to shut up the passage over the mountains, between Sophia and Philippopolis.’⁶⁰³ Both Luigi Marsigli and Guillaume Lejean provide depictions of the route of the *Via Militaris* through the ‘Porte Trajane’ (see Figures 52 & 53). The French geologist, Ami Boué, whilst travelling through the region, claimed that the gate had been dismantled in 1837 on the orders of the Ottoman General, Ferik Ahmed Pasha.⁶⁰⁴ Boué claims that from the material acquired from this fortification the Ottomans were able to construct a watch-tower and two inns, whilst the rest was then used to repair the Sofia-Plovdiv road.

⁵⁹⁸ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 68.

⁵⁹⁹ G. B. Malleon, *Ambushes and surprises: being a description of some of the most famous instances of the leading into ambush and the surprise of armies, from the time of Hannibal to the period of the Indian mutiny* (London, 1885), p. 176-8., also see Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos) Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, Vol. 6, p. 190-1.

⁶⁰⁰ B. de La Brocquière, *Le Voyage d’Outremer*, p. 269.

⁶⁰¹ Dernschwam, *Ein Fugger-Kaufmann im Osmanischen Reich*, p. 25.

⁶⁰² Mundy, *Itinerarium Mundi*, p. 61.

⁶⁰³ Lady M. W. Montagu, *The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 168.

⁶⁰⁴ A. Boué, *La Turquie d’Europe, ou, Observations sur la géographie, la géologie, l’histoire naturelle, la statistique, les moeurs, les coutumes, l’archéologie, l’agriculture, l’industrie, le commerce, les gouvernements divers, le clergé, l’histoire et l’état politique de cet empire* (Paris, 1840), p. 357.

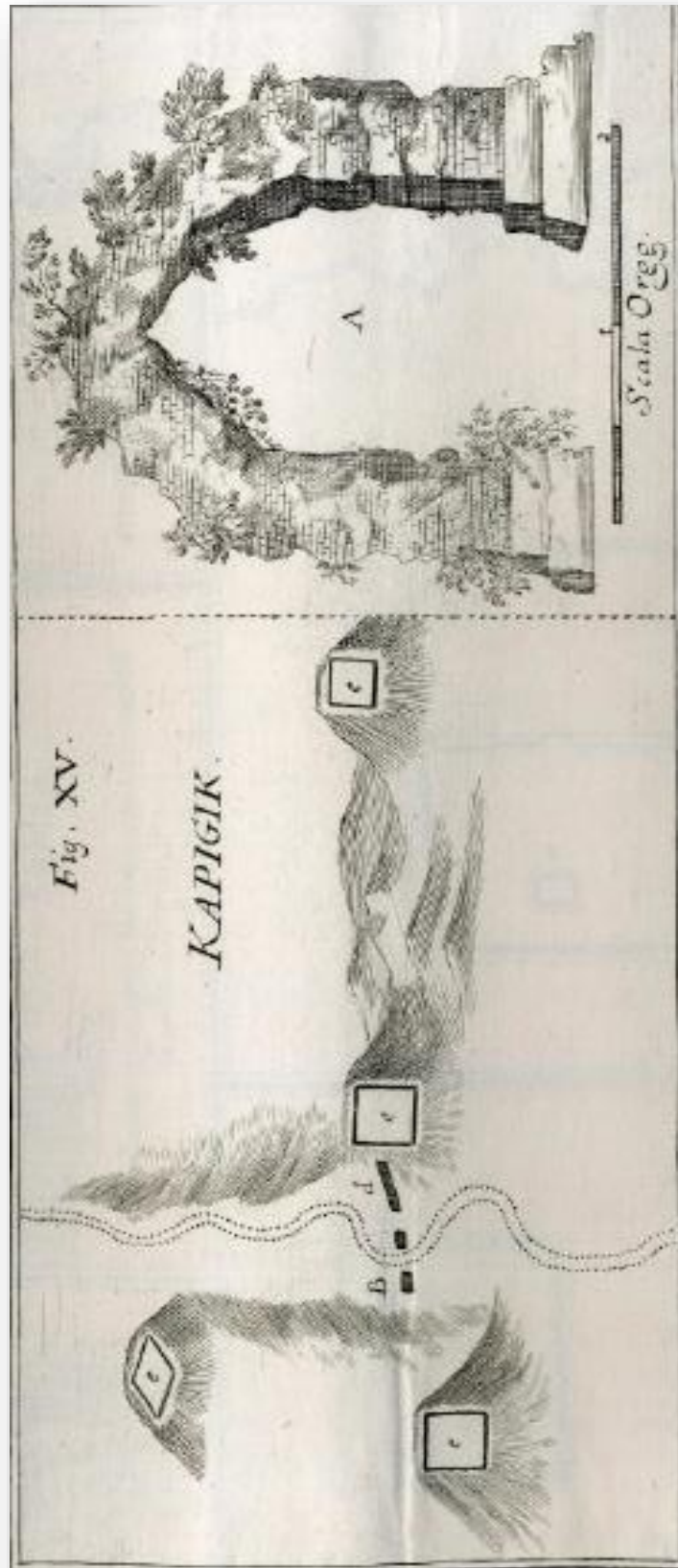


Figure 52: Depiction of the route of the *Via Militaris* as it enters the Succi Pass, and the remains of the Gates of Trajan. From Marsigli, *Danubius Pannonico-mysicus*, p. 51.



Figure 53: Route of the *Via Militaris* through the Gates of Trajan. From G. Lejean, 'Voyage en Bulgarie', *Le tour du Monde*, 26 (1873), p. 159.

The retreat of Basil II from the failed siege of Serdica in 986 also contains useful information pertaining to this region. Leo the Deacon relates that after Basil II raised the siege the army marched for a full day back towards the capital, before pitching camp in a thicket, and the next day they negotiated a wooded defile, full of caves, before entering steep terrain full of gullies.⁶⁰⁵ This description neatly matches the terrain that would have been encountered passing through the Succi Pass, as the enclosed valley with steeply forested slopes opens into foothills as it enters the Maritsa Valley. It was here that the Bulgarians, under Emperor Simeon I, ambushed the Byzantine column and annihilated it.

Approximately half way down the Succi Pass the Yavoritza River turns to the north, and the valley here rises from approximately 600 metres up to a little over 700 metres, before finally descending more sharply as it approaches the modern town of Vetren. In this section the road follows a small, fast flowing mountain stream that runs south-east, through the town of Vetren, before finally joining the Maritsa River some 5 kilometres distant. Curiously, Miller depicts the *Via Militaris* as turning to follow the course of the Yavoritza River to the north, a course that matches that of the modern highway (Figure 54).⁶⁰⁶ This final part of the pass, as it enters the Maritsa Valley, is the steepest section of the route, and it is likely to avoid this region that the modern highway branches to the north. However there is no evidence to suggest that the Roman road took this route. Indeed, the main road in the early twentieth century proceeded directly along the course of the Succi Valley, passing the medieval fortress of 'Palanka', located approximately 10 kilometres from the village of Vetren and named after the now abandoned village of Palankata that once existed at this site, and the remains of which survive today.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁵ Leo the Deacon, *Historia*, p. 214.

⁶⁰⁶ Miller, *Itineraria Romana*, p. 534.

⁶⁰⁷ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 255.

After Soneium, the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* lists the *mutatio* Pons Ucasi at a distance of six Roman miles (approximately 9 kilometres). Ucasus is the ancient name of the Yavoritza River, and so it is thought that this station was located at the site of a bridge over the river.⁶⁰⁸ The remains of the fortress of Palanka are also conveniently located 9 kilometres distant from Soneium, although no clear link between these two has been established (see Figures 55 & 56). Aside from the aforementioned fortress that governs the entrance to the pass, and that of Palanka which is located approximately halfway along its length, another fortress exists on the fringe of Vetren, covering the southern flank of the pass as it enters the Maritsa Valley, known variously as Litopolis or Kamengrad. Nearby was uncovered a cemetery that is claimed to contain the remains of ‘Germans’, who are presumed to perhaps be participants of the Third Crusade, however the veracity of this association is difficult to ascertain.⁶⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the position of these medieval fortifications strongly suggests that the medieval route of the *Via Militaris* proceeded directly along the Succi Pass, without the deviation to the north that Miller depicts.

⁶⁰⁸ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 86.

⁶⁰⁹ E. Koytcheva, ‘Logistics of the early crusades in the Balkans on *Via Militaris*’, in K. Holzner-Tobisch, T. Kührtreiber & G. Blaschitz eds., *Die Vielschichtigkeit der Straße: Kontinuität und Wandel in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit* (Vienna, 2012), p. 223.

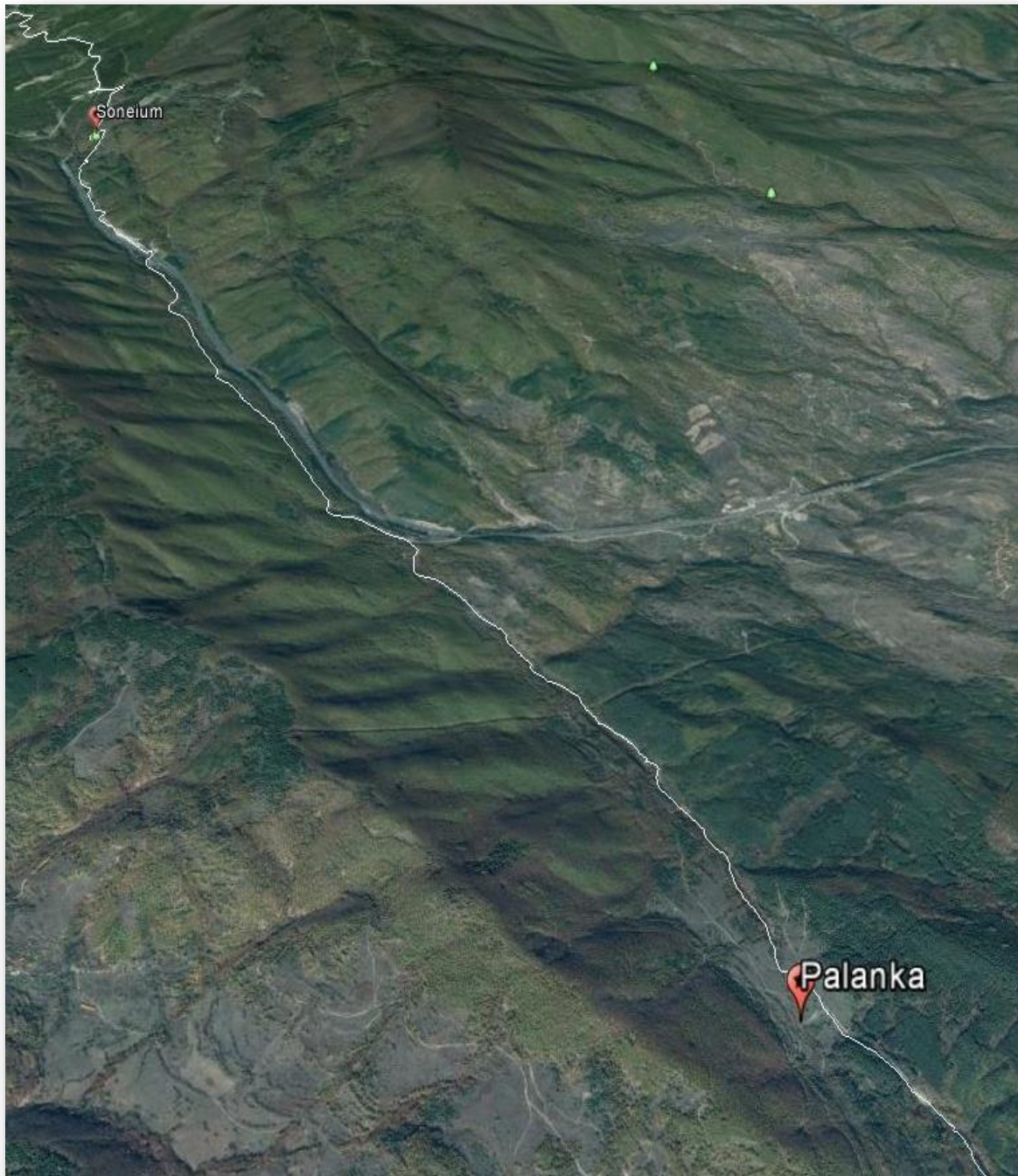


Figure 55: Route through the Succus Pass, showing the fortress of Soneium, the point where the 'Trakia' Highway turns to the north, and the remains of Palanka. Image captured via Google Earth, whilst the white line represents the GPS path traced by the author.



Figure 56: Remains of the fortress of 'Palanka'.

The road through the Succi Pass may also have been relatively broad, and the narrowness of the route as mentioned in sources relating to the Third Crusade may be more a reflection of the fact that there was little or no opportunity for an army to spread out on either side of the road, than directly related to the dimensions of the road itself. Indeed, in this section of the pass, after the Yavoritza, and the modern highway which follows it, turns to the north, evidence remains of a road of significant proportions that is today followed by an unpaved service road. The existing surface that can be observed here consists of a bed of loosely fitted small broken stones, very similar to the road surfaces near Dragoman mentioned above. This road was evidently exceptionally broad, and is near eight metres wide along its entire extent during this section of the pass, again similar to other identified segments of the *Via Militaris* (see Figures 57-61).



Figure 57: Remains of the *Via Militaris* in the Succi Pass. The existing dirt road covers only a small part of the total surface. The edge of the embankment can be seen on the left.



Figure 58: Detail of loose fitting stones typical of the surface of the road.



Figure 59: Further examples of surviving stonework.



Figure 60: Surviving stone kerbs. The embankment drops away sharply beyond.

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Figure 61: Further example of surviving stone surface. The road surface extends as far as the tree line on the right of the image.

This road is yet to be the subject of archaeological excavation, but the surviving surface is almost certainly of Ottoman origin. What is most impressive are the steep embankments that have been constructed to allow the road to run along the northern flank of the Succi Pass, above the small stream mentioned above. These embankments may also be of Ottoman origin, but they might equally represent Roman construction, as given the narrowness of the route through the pass it is highly likely that the Ottoman road followed the course of the existing Roman road (Figure 62). Given the critical importance of the Succi Pass in the late Roman era, especially after the establishment of Constantinople as the new imperial capital, it is not surprising that the road here may have been of such impressive proportions, and it may have been extensively rebuilt during or after the reign of Constantine so as to better benefit the most strategically important pass governing the main highway to the new capital.



Figure 62: An example where the road has been terraced into the slope of the valley.

This does not tell us what condition the road might have been during the medieval period, however, and few hints can be derived from sources from the period as to its state. Leo the Deacon only mentions that the pass was '*narrow and steep*.'⁶¹⁰ Likewise crusading sources make no special mention of the pass, other than the fact that it was very narrow, which suggests that the road surface was limited by the existing Roman embankments. Wheeled vehicles could seemingly make use of the pass, but likely slowed progress considerably. The pass also seems to have been usable, to some extent, during winter. Emperor Isaac Angelos, leading a campaign against Vlachs in the Central Balkan Mountains north of Serdica, found that winter was closing in and so, whilst leaving the bulk of the army behind, in the month of December retreated back to Constantinople over the pass, accompanied

⁶¹⁰ Leo the Deacon, *Historia*, p. 213.

only by 'light armed troops.'⁶¹¹ John Hunyadi likewise approached the pass in late December, and despite the efforts of the defending Ottomans, was able to force a way into the Maritsa Valley.⁶¹²

The next station mentioned by the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* is Bona Mansio, and it is likely that this location can be identified with a site on the outskirts of the Bulgarian town of Vetren where the ruins of a Roman fortification have been discovered. The fort at this site was of rectangular shape, covering approximately 400 square metres, and was protected by three towers.⁶¹³ It is possible that the station Lissas, named by the *Antonini Augusti*, is the same station. Excavations at Bona Mansio uncovered an inscription dating to the reign of Emperor Gordian I, and it is also mentioned as part of the journey made by St Alexander in Thrace in 289, as he was escorted by Roman soldiers to the town of Druzipara (near Adrianople), where he was executed.⁶¹⁴ It is further also recorded that Emperor Valens stayed at this location, during a tour of the Balkan provinces, in the spring of 365.⁶¹⁵

Historically the region where the Succi Pass enters the Maritsa Valley appears to have played a major role in cross-Balkan trade. Located just south of Bona Mansio, on the banks of the Maritsa River, was the important Thracian trading post of Pistiros. An inscription related to the site, dating to 350 BC when it formed part of the Odyrisian Kingdom of Thrace, was found at Bona Mansio, where it was likely being reused, and contains guarantees offered to Maronitans, Thasians, and people from Apolliana who traded there. Discovered in excavations at the site were fortifications and also large storage sites, and a great number of coins.⁶¹⁶ Pistiros was clearly an *emporion* of some significance, attracting trade not only from the Aegean heading north and east, to the important Thracian sites at Philippopolis and Panagyurishte, but also possibly westwards as well, across the Sredna Gora.

From Bona Mansio the *Via Militaris* took an easterly route across the Marista Valley in the direction of the modern town of Pazardjik. The *Itinerarium Burdigalense* lists the *mansio* Alusor at nine Roman miles from Bona Mansio, and it is thought that it was sited near the modern village of Boshulya. Remains of the road were discovered in this region in the late nineteenth century, where its surface was said to be well-preserved and ran to the south of the village of Boshulya, and parallel to the Maritsa River, towards Pazardjik (Figure 63).⁶¹⁷

⁶¹¹ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 219.

⁶¹² Malleon, *Ambushes and surprises*, p. 178-9.

⁶¹³ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 86-7.

⁶¹⁴ Ivanov ed., *Tabula Imperii Romani, K35/2 Philippopolis*, p. 55.

⁶¹⁵ Velkov, *The cities in Thrace and Dacia in Late Antiquity*, p. 32.

⁶¹⁶ On Pistiros see Archibald, *The Odyrisian Kingdom of Thrace*, p. 317.

⁶¹⁷ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 87.

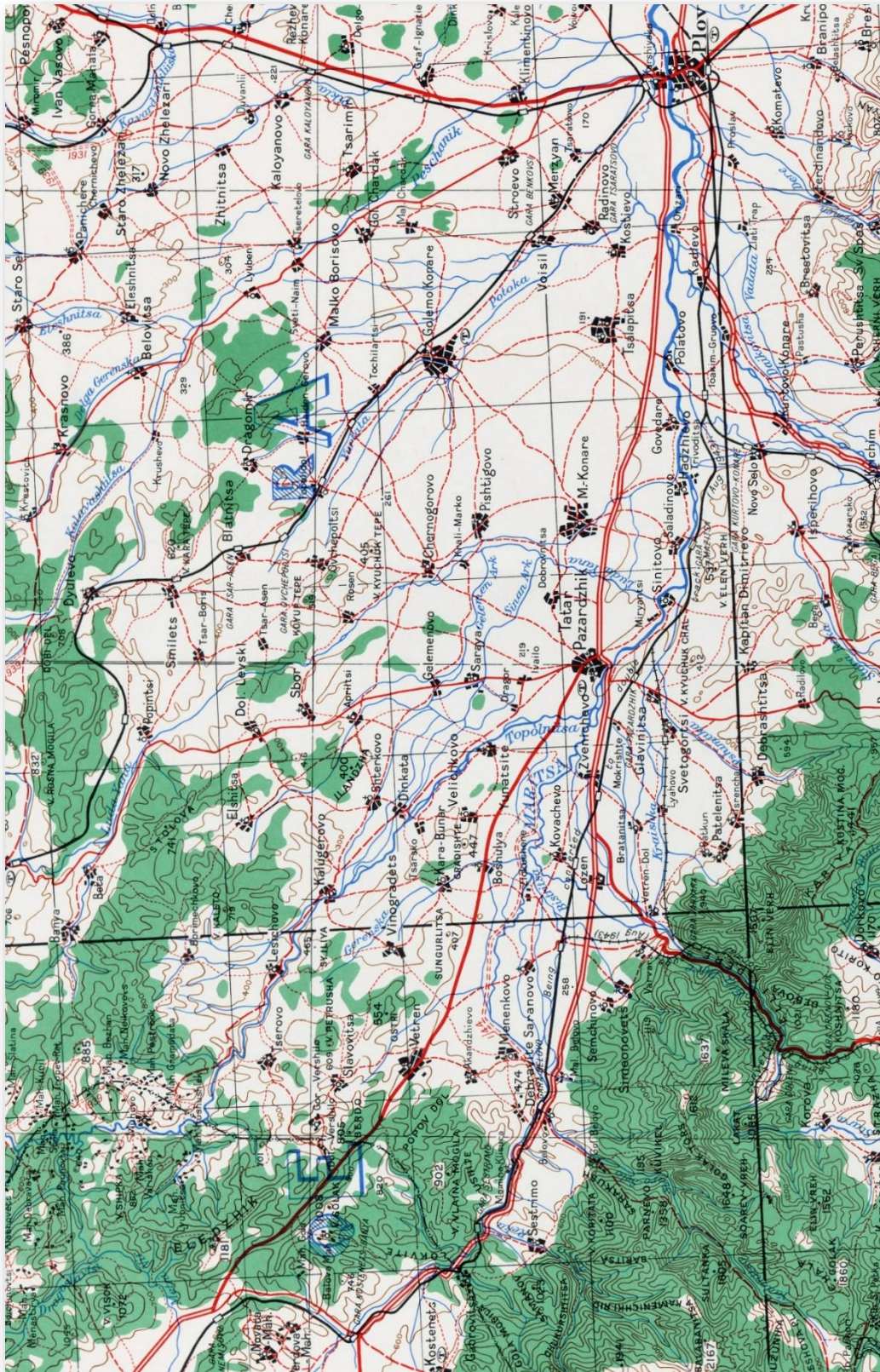


Figure 63: US Army map of 1944 showing the route through Vetren, from Ihtiman, towards Pazardjik. The alternate route to the south is through the Momina Klissura.

It is difficult to interpret the *Tabula Peutingerina* along this section of the *Via Militaris*. It lists the next station after Egirka as 'Zyrmis'. The *Itinerarium Burdigalense* and *Antonini Augusti*, however, both list Bessapara as the next station along the route. The location of Bessapara is well founded, as will be seen below, but no evidence exists of a station 'Zyrmis', and it is possible that it was located in the modern city of Pazardjik. After the settlement of Tatars in the fifteenth century, Pazardjik emerged as an important market centre along the Maritsa, but no remains of a Roman station are known at this location. Madzharov argues that Zyrmis is, therefore, most likely the same location as Bessapara.⁶¹⁸

It is believed that the *Via Militaris* crossed the Maritsa in the region of Pazardjik, possibly in the same location as the modern bridge today, however the earliest known remains of a bridge on this location date to the late seventeenth century, from a Bulgarian inscription discovered at the site.⁶¹⁹ Jireček makes an interesting argument that another road existed to the south of the Maritsa River that likewise ran to Philippopolis. He claims this road was made because the area through which the northern road ran was extremely swampy, and proved impossible to use during the spring and winter. In Jireček's opinion the Roman road therefore crossed to the south of the Maritsa at a distance of some 15 kilometres after the station of Bona Mansio and well before it entered Pazardjik.⁶²⁰ There is no evidence of any Roman bridge existing in this region and it is possible that any road Jireček observed was of later Ottoman construction. However this is far from certain, and the northern bank of the Maritsa River is still, to this day, quite marshy in places (see Figures 64 & 65).

⁶¹⁸ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 87-8.

⁶¹⁹ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 89.

⁶²⁰ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 36.

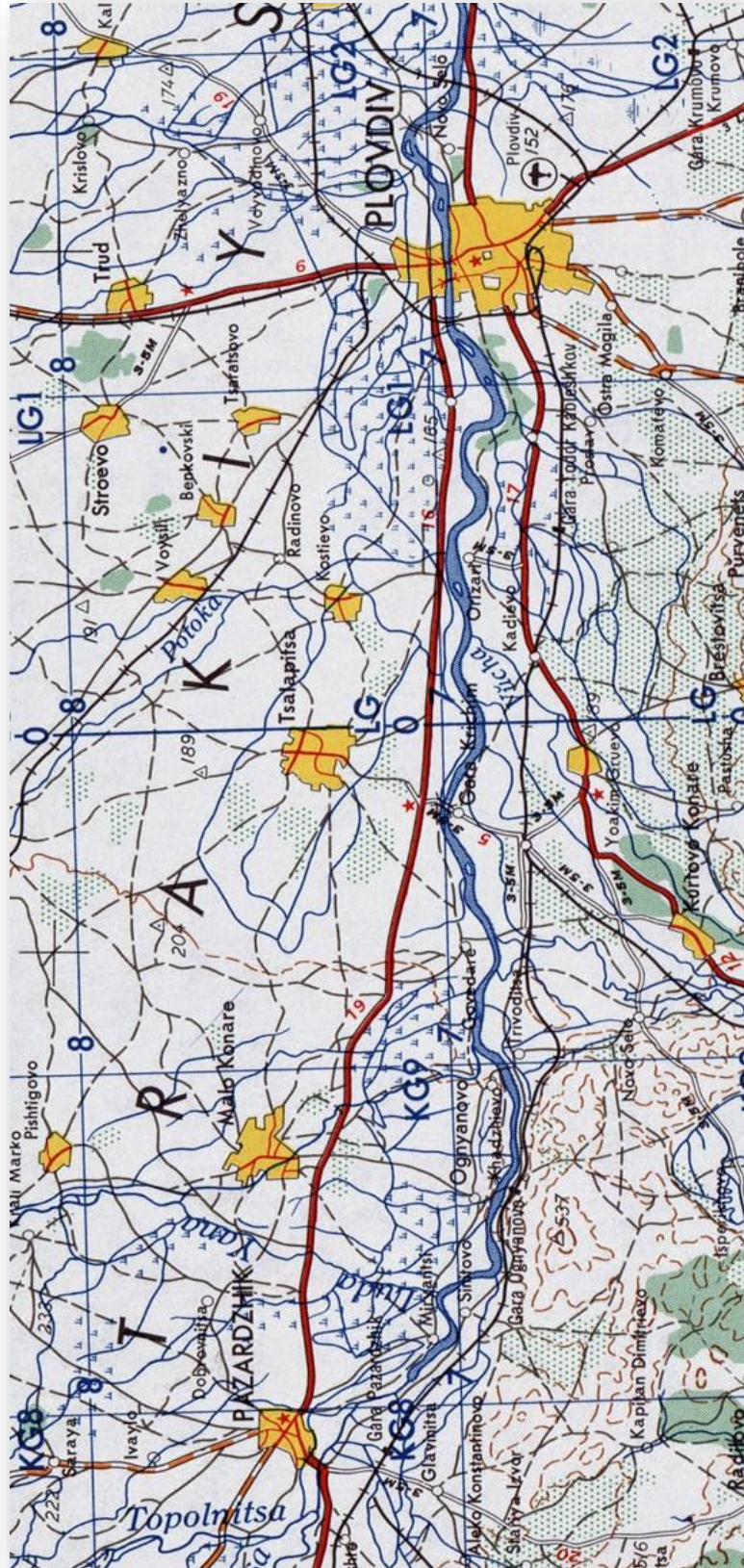


Figure 64: This US Army map of 1959 depicts the swampy land in particular to be found north of the Maritsa between Pazardjik and Plovdiv.



Figure 65: View of the Maritsa River, looking east, taken from the modern bridge in Pazardjik that is thought to be located on or near the site of the Roman bridge.

What is clear, though, is that the *Via Militaris* crossed the Maritsa River at some point in this area, and then proceeded the rest of the way to the city of Philippopolis along its southern bank. In the environs of the modern Bulgarian village of Sinitovo remains of a walled Roman settlement were uncovered, which are believed to be of the *mansio* Bessapara. Nothing survives of the site today, and it has been suggested that stones from the area were reused as building material by local villagers, and that erosion and landslides from the Bessaparian hills served to destroy what was left, to the extent that in the 1950s only the foundations of the walls remained.⁶²¹ Other archaeological finds in the area include the remains of an earthen water main, weaving workshops, and a large building of approximately 300 square metres.⁶²² Furthermore, located four kilometres from Sinitovo, on a spur of the Bessaparian hills, are the remains of a Byzantine fortress.

⁶²¹ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 90-1.

⁶²² Ivanov ed., *Tabula Imperii Romani, K35/2 Philippopolis*, p. 46-7.

It appears, therefore, that after crossing the Maritsa River, the *Via Militaris* then proceeded along its southern bank, between it and the Bessapar Hills that run parallel to the river for a length of some five kilometres (Figure 66). The location of the remains of the Byzantine fortress indicate it was used as a watch tower overlooking the road below, and it is one of the fortifications of Thrace rebuilt by Justinian, Besuparum, that is mentioned by Procopius.⁶²³ The height of the Bessapar Hills (approximately 500 metres above sea level) provide a good vantage point from which to observe the road as it proceeded along the valley towards the city of Philippopolis.



Figure 66: The view south over the Maritsa. The Bessapar Hills are in the foreground, with the Rhodope Mountains in the background.

This evaluation though is far from universally agreed upon. One argument is that the road ran far further to south, close to the northern foothills of the Rhodope Mountains, and that the station of Bessapara was therefore found somewhere in the environs of the modern town of Persuhtitsa, which is located approximately 25 kilometres from Pazardjik and 26 kilometres from Plovdiv.⁶²⁴ This region was an important site in the early Byzantine period, as evidenced by the remains of the ‘Red Church’, dating to approximately the early sixth century (Figure 67).

⁶²³ Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, p. 309.

⁶²⁴ Madzharov, *Roman roads in Bulgaria*, p. 90.



Figure 67: Remains of the sixth century 'Red Church' in Persuhtitsa, south-west of modern Plovdiv.

That remains of a Roman road have been found in this region, near the town of Ustina, just to the west of Perushtitsa, seem to give some credence to this claim. Madzharov, however, argues that this instead represents a secondary trans-Rhodopian road. Remains of this road have been discovered further in the Rhodope Mountains, and are remarkably well preserved. This road was approximately three metres wide and makes a number of sharp turns as it negotiates the steep mountain terrain.⁶²⁵ Although its exact route is difficult to trace, it had evidently been an important route in the Ottoman period, linking the Maritsa Valley with the Aegean, before declining in the late nineteenth century, likely as a result of the establishment of modern political frontiers in 1878.⁶²⁶

The *Itinerarium Burdigalense* lists the last station before Philippopolis as the *mutatio* Tugugerum. It has been suggested that this station lay near to the village of Zlatitrap, located approximately ten

⁶²⁵ Delev, 'The middle Mesta region in antiquity', p. 27-8.

⁶²⁶ For more discussion of this route see Delev & Popov, 'The Ancient Road Network in the Middle Mesta Region', p. 60-2.

kilometres from modern Plovdiv.⁶²⁷ On the outskirts of this village archaeological remains have been found, including a *milliarium* dating to the reign of Emperor Maximinus (235-238).⁶²⁸ Recorded fragments of the road's surface, and surviving *milliaria*, therefore make it clear that after the *mansio* Bessapara the road angled slightly to the south, away from the current course of the Maritsa River. Near the village of Zlatitrap the Škorpil brothers chronicled in the late nineteenth century a surviving length of the *Via Militaris* measuring nine metres in width, although no remains of its surface are known in this region today.⁶²⁹ The road then proceeded directly to the city of Philippopolis and along this route, near the Thracian Tell of Ploskata Mogila, approximately one kilometre past Zlatitrap, was found an inscription dating to the reign of Emperor Alexander Severus (225-235).⁶³⁰ From here the road approached Philippopolis from near the course of the aqueduct, whose ruins can still be partially seen today, before entering the city by its southern gate.

The course of the *Via Militaris* between Serdica and Philippopolis is therefore largely predictable, even if some of the particulars of the route are still unknown. The road proceeded east across the Sofia plain and, after negotiating the Vakarel Pass, traversed the Ihtiman Plateau. It then descended sharply into the Maritsa Valley via the Succi Pass. The Roman road clearly crossed to the southern bank of the Maritsa River likely somewhere in the vicinity of modern Pazardjik, or possibly some distance before it, and subsequently followed the southern bank of the river to the city of Philippopolis. During the Middle Ages, however, an alternate road may have continued to the north of the river, meaning the Maritsa only needed to be crossed once, rather than twice as the Roman road did.⁶³¹

The greatest source of contention, above those issues listed above, is whether or not a separate route into the Maritsa Valley existed through the Momima Klissura, or 'Maiden's Gorge'. This is a 24 kilometre long defile that is approximately 200-300 metres deep, and around 200 metres broad at its base, that follows the course of the Maritsa River, and is located approximately ten kilometres to the south of the Succi Pass, and follows a route roughly parallel to it (Figure 68).⁶³²

⁶²⁷ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 94-5.

⁶²⁸ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 93.

⁶²⁹ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 94.

⁶³⁰ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 94-5.

⁶³¹ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos) Tabula Imperii Byzantini, Vol. 6*, p. 133-4.

⁶³² V. Stanev, 'Koprivlen and the Middle Mesta Valley in Modern Times', in P. Delev & D. Vulcheva eds., *Koprivlen Archaeological Site; Rescue Investigations along Gotse Delchev - Drama Road, 1998-1999, Vol. 1* (Sofia, 2002), p. 33.

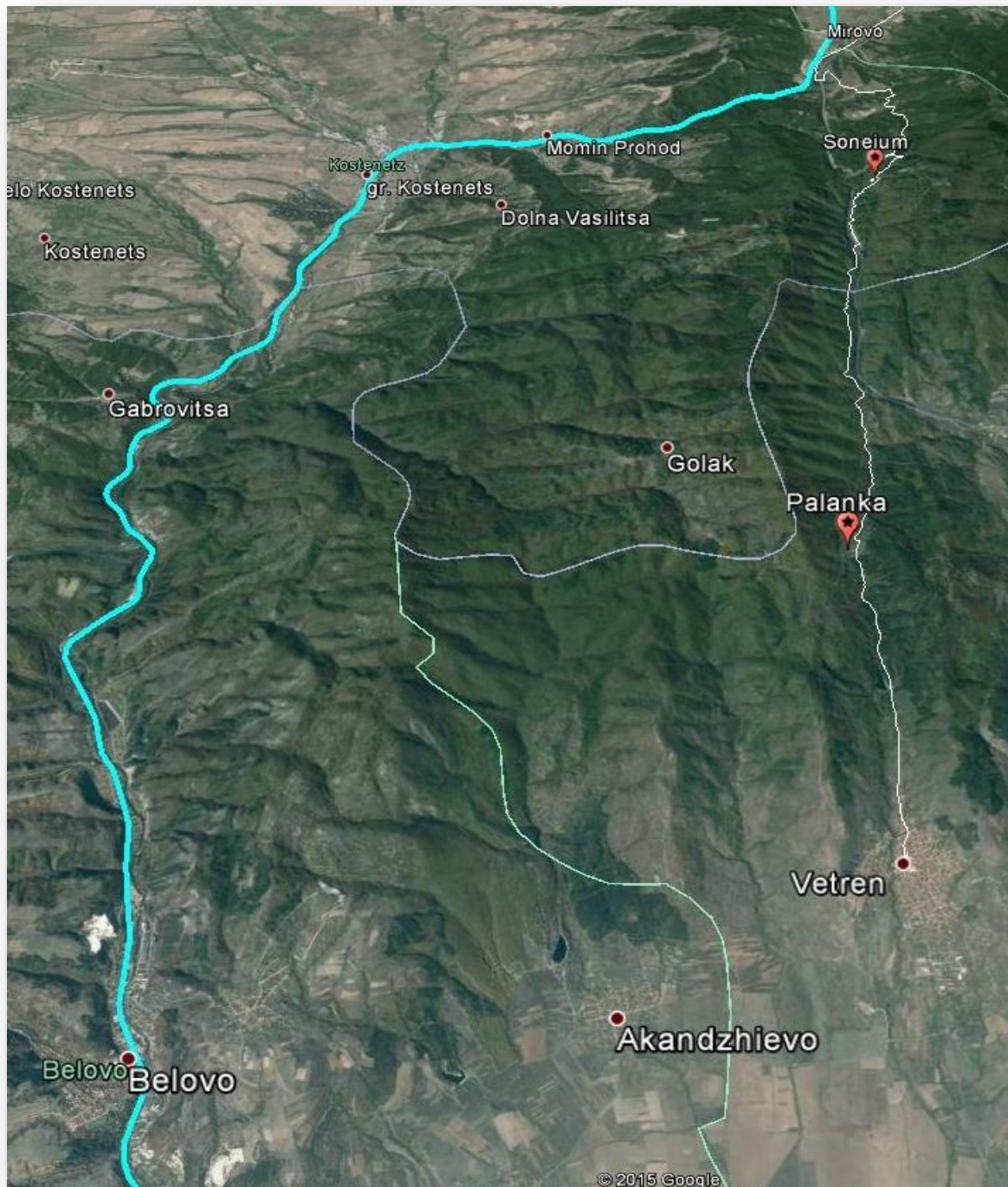


Figure 68: The two passes through the Sredna Gora. The blue line on the left is the course of the modern rail line, through the Momina Klissura, the white line on the right the route of the Succi Pass. Image captured via Google Earth.

Jireček attests to a road in this region, one that followed the course of the modern rail line and passed through the Bulgarian town of Belovo before proceeding towards Samakov. In the fourteenth century,

Jireček claims, this was the main road linking Constantinople with Bosnia and Ragusa.⁶³³ Certainly a major road existed in this region during the Ottoman period. Visiting the site of the Gates of Trajan in 1717, Lady Mary Wortley opined that it more likely represented the remains of a triumphal arch than a fortress, for 'if that passage had been shut up, there are many others that would serve for the march of an army.'⁶³⁴ Undoubtedly she was referring to the alternate route south through the Momina Klissura. By the beginning of the twentieth century this was a major route, and ranked as a first class road by the British Naval Intelligence division.⁶³⁵

Did a secondary road run through the Momina Klissura into the Maritsa Valley in the earlier medieval period though? Jireček concludes that since no remains of a cobbled path could be identified in the area, and moreover no fortresses cover the pass, in contrast to the well-guarded route through the Succi Pass, Roman road builders had not known about this narrow, heavily forested, defile.⁶³⁶ Yet the region displays remains of medieval fortification and settlement. The modern town of Belovo, which sits at the foot of the Momina Klissura, may have been the centre of a Byzantine diocese in the tenth to twelfth centuries.⁶³⁷ Near the village of Momina Klissura, on the left bank of the Maritsa River, sits the fortress of Gradishte, covering the pass below. Displaying impressive masonry work and walls some 70 centimetres thick, it is difficult to date its construction exactly.⁶³⁸ Excavations of a church in the environs of the modern village below however uncovered an inscription that dates its construction to 1355, during the reign of Tsar Ivan Alexander. Undoubtedly a medieval settlement existed on this site, and the region also displays evidence of even older Thracian occupation.⁶³⁹

Evidently an important road ran through the Momina Klissura, as far as Samakov, and then onto medieval Velevousdion, ancient Pautalia, near the modern town of Kyustendil, where the extensive remains of a medieval church, popularly known as 'Spasovica', which was constructed in 1330, were uncovered.⁶⁴⁰ This route provided direct access to the Struma River valley, and thence onto the Aegean, as well as towards the Dalmatian coast. What is less easy to determine, however, is the importance of this route during the crusading period. Samakov, in particular, only emerged as a major trading hub from the fifteenth century onwards when it became host to a major iron mining and

⁶³³ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 36-7.

⁶³⁴ Lady M. W. Montagu, *The letters and works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 168.

⁶³⁵ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 215-7.

⁶³⁶ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 93.

⁶³⁷ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos) Tabula Imperii Byzantini 6*, p. 198.

⁶³⁸ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos) Tabula Imperii Byzantini 6*, p. 367.

⁶³⁹ M. Vaklinov, 'The Roman Imperial Period, Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages', in P. Delev & D. Vulcheva eds., *Koprivlen Archaeological Site; Rescue Investigations along Gotse Delchev - Drama Road, 1998-1999, Vol. 1* (Sofia, 2002), p. 54.

⁶⁴⁰ S. Ćurčić, 'The Role of Late Byzantine Thessalonike in Church Architecture in the Balkans', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 57 (Washington D.C., 2003), p. 78.

smelting industry.⁶⁴¹ So whilst a road may have run through the pass, and it undoubtedly emerged as a major thoroughfare during the Ottoman period, it is difficult to determine whether it was used during the period in question.⁶⁴²

Nevertheless, it is sometimes argued that this alternate route played an important role during the passage of the Third Crusade, and in particular the Byzantine attempt to blockade the Succi Pass in order to deny access to the Maritsa Valley gives rise to the possibility of alternate routes being utilised. The sources chronicle that the crusaders, after finding Serdica '*lacking in all human comfort*' marched for one day before making camp, at which they were met by a group of crusaders that had been following in their footsteps.⁶⁴³ The next day the crusaders approached the '*last and most narrow passes of Bulgaria*' which they found to be blockaded against them, and that further a nearby Byzantine army was keeping their progress under close observation.

The crusader sources provide uniformly similar depictions of what followed. The *Historia de Expeditione* states that Barbarossa '*left part of the army in camp, and accompanied by the squadrons of armoured knights, he broke through the passes after a brief but triumphant fight, intending sensibly to cut through the obstacles that had been placed in various places by the Greeks. The latter turned tail and fled, running away from the imperial majesty and the champions of Christ; anyway they never dared to await the charge of our men.*'⁶⁴⁴ The *Historia peregrinorum* claims this force contained 500 knights, picked from '*among the most astounding of his army, whose horses also had iron surcoats*', and further adds that it was led by the Duke of Swabia.⁶⁴⁵ The *Gesta Federici I Imperatoris in Expeditione Sacra* also describes the scene: '*as the Greeks saw those who had been sent in advance to the Gates of St Basil, immediate fear and confusion of mind fell upon them and they withdrew as fast as they could, spreading the news throughout the whole army of the Greeks that the indomitable and iron-clad army of the Germans had arrived on iron-clad horses, and it was safer to hasten in flight than to await their terrible attack. On hearing this, the army was greatly afraid and immediately turned and told the citizens of Philippopolis to flee, announcing the arrival of the German people, whose valour no human force could resist in battle.*'⁶⁴⁶

The crusader sources, therefore, all agree in the details; a detachment of knights charged the Greeks, who subsequently fled, and the defences were then committed to flames before the crusaders

⁶⁴¹ J. R. Lampe & M. R. Jackson, *Balkan Economic History, 1550-1950: from Imperial borderlands to developing nations* (Bloomington, 1982), p. 144.

⁶⁴² Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos) Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, Vol. 6, p. 191.

⁶⁴³ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 68.

⁶⁴⁴ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 68.

⁶⁴⁵ *Historia peregrinorum*, p. 68.

⁶⁴⁶ *Gesta Federici I. Imperatoris in Expeditione Sacra*, p. 68.

proceeded unmolested into the valley below. It is not clear within the sources, however, which pass was blockaded; the Vakarel Pass or the Succi Pass, and it may have been the case that both were blocked against their passage to some degree. This depiction certainly appears plausible, and Duke Frederick of Swabia with his mounted vanguard was in an advantageous position to deliver an immediate, and irresistible, assault upon the defenders in the pass and clear a passage for the rest of the army to follow.⁶⁴⁷

Nicetas Choniates, however, provides a slightly different depiction of events, and claims that Emperor Isaac Angelos resolved to block the mountain passes against Barbarossa and so ordered them to be rendered impassable through the felling of trees. The *Domestikos of the West* Alexius Gidos and *protostrator* Manuel Kamytzes were instructed to follow close behind with their troops and stealthily attack the Germans as they collected fodder and searched for food. The humour of the situation, in Choniates' words, was that *'the king took another road, arrived before Philippopolis, and set up an entrenched camp. By passing on the opposite side, he was undetected by the Romans until he was in front of them, occupying those places from which he was to have been barred and for which purposes the mountain passes had been barricaded.'*⁶⁴⁸

Choniates' depiction certainly gives the impression that an alternate route, such as that through the Momina Klissura, had been used in order to flank the Byzantine defences, but this scenario ignores any confrontation in the pass, which all of the crusader sources agree upon. It is possible that Choniates describes a detachment that was led through the Momina Klissura, but this is difficult to envisage. Whilst Jireček claims that this route was 'easier' and only lacking in a cobblestoned path to follow, it would in reality have presented serious complications. For one the route through the Momina Klissura was more winding than that of the Succi Pass, and without an established road bed to follow a force on horseback would have found the going very difficult indeed.⁶⁴⁹ Moreover, the diversion would have been a lengthy one, and from the modern village of Mirovo, where the alternate road branches to the south, it would have nearly doubled the distance a detachment would have needed to cover before reaching the Maritsa Valley.

The main Byzantine force was evidently not occupying the mountain passes, and Choniates states that Gidos and Kamytzes were instructed to instead shadow the crusader force and attack its foraging parties. Certainly this army remained in the field after the loss of Philippopolis, and continued to keep the crusaders under observation, occasionally attacking isolated parties as they searched for

⁶⁴⁷ Eickhoff, *Friedrich Barbarossa im Orient*, p. 66-7.

⁶⁴⁸ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 221.

⁶⁴⁹ Koytcheva, 'Logistics of the early crusades in the Balkans on *Via Militaris*', p. 223.

firewood.⁶⁵⁰ Choniates' use of the phrase to describe Barbarossa's course of action, '*by passing on the opposite side, he was undetected by the Romans until he appeared in front of them*', might mean the opposite bank of the Maritsa River, for it is not entirely clear where the river was bridged in this period, or even on which bank the main road was located, as it approached Philippopolis, and it is possible that roads existed on both sides of the river. That Choniates does not comment upon the battle in the pass mentioned within crusader sources is curious, as he would have had no reason not to, as it offered the opportunity to both heap scorn on Isaac's hostility towards the crusaders, and to further praise the military prowess of Barbarossa, a man whom he evidently greatly admired.

It is difficult to envision how a detour through the Momina Klissura, by a relatively large force, could possibly have shortened the time necessary to reach Philippopolis. Without an established road bed to follow, and there is no clear evidence of one having existed at this time, it would instead have necessitated lengthy delays in manoeuvring through difficult terrain. A passage in the *Historia peregrinorum* states that '*the division of the lord emperor*' joined the main host at Philippopolis, but this may have been due to time it took for the entire army to reunite at the city, and does not necessarily suggest that a diversion was made, rather that Barbarossa's division, which was the last in the column, reached Philippopolis some time later than the rest of the army. Eickhoff concludes that those Romans mentioned by Choniates, that the crusaders simply bypassed, must have been located on the road below the pass, and declines to even mention the possibility of a detachment using the Momina Klissura at all.⁶⁵¹ This interpretation, given the difficulties such a detour must have encompassed, is likely the only feasible conclusion to draw.

Choniates' hostility towards Isaac Angelos should also be noted here, and in particular it is clear that Choniates believed that Isaac's hostility towards the crusaders was entirely misplaced. It is interesting that in his description of the passage of the Second Crusade, noting Manuel Comnenus' military preparations, Choniates' argues that they were done '*in a pacific manner and not by engaging in combat*'.⁶⁵² Indeed Choniates declines to mention any of the military confrontations cited by Kinnamos, in particular the manner in which Prosouch drove the Germans out of Adrianople, and instead argues that all disputes with the crusaders were settled amicably. Choniates favoured a diplomatic approach to be taken towards Barbarossa, one which he was ultimately able to convince the emperor to adopt, and therefore this passage is likely intended to ridicule Isaac's earlier commitment to military confrontation, and portray it as hopelessly flawed and misguided.

⁶⁵⁰ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 224.

⁶⁵¹ Eickhoff, *Friedrich Barbarossa im Orient*, p. 67. n. 39.

⁶⁵² Choniates, *Historia*, p. 36.

A further curious incident also remains to be explored. In early December, 1189, the crusader host was split between Philippopolis and Adrianople. Barbarossa detached a force of infantry to return to Philippopolis (1,200 according to the *Historia de Expeditione*, and 300 to the *Historia peregrinorum*), to assist in its evacuation and escort the crusaders baggage to Adrianople. The *Historia de Expeditione* also states that discussions were to meanwhile take place with ‘*the Great Count of Serbia at the passes on the frontier of Bulgaria*’.⁶⁵³ As the last of the crusaders left Philippopolis, committing the city to flames as they departed, they halted for some days at Constantia whilst Duke Berthold of Dalmatia and his escort made for their designated meeting place with the Count of Serbia.⁶⁵⁴

The Count did not arrive however, being busy with ‘*his efforts to conduct a campaign in Bulgaria*’, and so the Duke of Dalmatia returned to Constantia, and the crusaders continued along their journey until, finally, they ‘*straggled into Adrianople in several groups*’.⁶⁵⁵ The diary of Tageno, as related by *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, presents an even more detailed depiction of events, indicating that the force left Philippopolis on January 15, 1190, reaching Constantia on January 21, before being reunited with the main army at Adrianople on February 6.⁶⁵⁶ The relatively long stretch of time between Constantia and Adrianople can be accounted for by the need to await the return of the Duke of Dalmatia, and his messengers, and the difficult conditions they no doubt encountered travelling in the height of winter.

Jireček asserts that the town of Constantia was Kostonec, the modern town of Kostenets, and that the Duke of Dalmatia, led by guides provided to him by Stephen Nemanja, therefore had made use of the Momina Klissura during this meeting in January of 1190.⁶⁵⁷ Jireček’s identification of Constantia with Kostenec is doubtful however, as the crusaders were at this time marching in completely the opposite direction. The Thracian town of Konstanteia, located north of the modern Bulgarian town of Simeonovgrad, near the site of the Roman station of Arzos, is a possible alternative. Konstanteia is known to have been an important Thracian town in the Middle Ages, and lay directly on the route between Philippopolis and Adrianople.⁶⁵⁸

As will be discussed further below, Jireček erroneously believed that the *Via Militaris* travelled along the right bank of the Maritsa River in this region, rather than the left, and therefore, mistakenly placing the station of Arzos somewhere in the vicinity of modern Harmanli, was unaware of the association between the road and the town of Konstanteia to the north of the river. As a consequence, Jireček’s

⁶⁵³ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 82-3.

⁶⁵⁴ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 88.

⁶⁵⁵ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 88.

⁶⁵⁶ Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, p. 156.

⁶⁵⁷ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 93.

⁶⁵⁸ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, p. 314.

claim that the Duke of Dalmatia made use of the Momina Klissura during the winter of 1190 must be considered as unlikely, as there is no other evidence to support this statement, other than the passage within the *Historia de Expeditione* that states that the meeting took place at the ‘*mountain passes on the frontier of Bulgaria*’. It may have even been that the passes in question were located in the Central Balkans, to the north, as these were far closer and more accessible to the crusaders than the passes through the Sredna Gora to the east.

While the usage of the Momina Klissura in the medieval period as of yet has no clear answer, it seems highly unlikely that Barbarossa would have embarked on a diversion through this pass when he had specifically placed himself at the rear of the army in order to ensure the maintenance of march discipline in the face of expected ambush. To abandon the army and take instead an alternate route is entirely opposed to this intention, and makes little sense given that the main Byzantine army in the region remained unfought. It is less clear whether or not Barbarossa’s envoys had made use of this pass during the ultimately aborted attempt to meet with Stephen Nemanja, as a small force would have had less difficulty in negotiating such terrain. However, since there is no support within the sources to confirm Jireček’s identification of Constantia with the modern city of Kostenets, this interpretation must also remain doubtful.

11.6: Philippopolis

The city of Philippopolis is located on a series of hills that are the remains of a peneplain that has been overlaid with sedimentary deposits.⁶⁵⁹ The three central hills of the city remain its most famous characteristic. The satirist Lucian described the city, in a conversation between Heracles and Hermes, in his play, *The Runaways*:

“Heracles. You see those two magnificent mountains (the big one is Haemus, and the other Rhodope), and the fertile plain that spreads between them, running to the very foot of either? These three grand, rugged crests that stand out so proudly yonder form as it were a triple citadel to the city that lies beneath; you can see it now, look.

Hermes. Superb! A queen among cities; her splendours reach us even here. And what is the great river that flows so close beneath the walls?

⁶⁵⁹ Beshkov, ‘The upper Thracian plain in Bulgarian agriculture’, p. 179.

*Heracles. The Hebrus, and the city was built by Philip*⁶⁶⁰

The city was not built by Philipp II of Macedon, although it would continue to carry his name after his conquest of it in 342 BC. Before this it had been host to a Thracian population who had built a settlement on the central acropolis. The first Thracian settlement at the location, known as Eumolpais, is thought to date from approximately 5000 BC, which makes Philippopolis one of the oldest, if not the oldest, continuously inhabited sites in Europe.

In 72 AD the city was captured by the Romans, who retained its classical Greek name, and it thereafter expanded greatly under Roman rule. There are archaeological remains in the city of a treasury (dated to the reign of Commodus [183-184], and the only discovered treasury in the entire region), an agora that is the largest found in the region, a theatre and stadium dating to the first half of the second century, as well as extensive fortifications, with an inscription on the city gates dated to the principate of Marcus Aurelius (172).⁶⁶¹ During the Roman period the city was not only an important link on the *Via Militaris*, but also to the Danube, via the Philippopolis-Oescus Road, as well as the Aegean via the previously mentioned Rhodope Mountain road.

Geographically the region surrounding Philippopolis is an extremely fertile one, constantly fed by alluvial deposits carried by the Maritsa River and its tributaries from the Rila, Rhodope, Sredna Gora and Central Balkan Mountains. The Maritsa Valley is today the most agriculturally productive region in the modern state of Bulgaria, despite accounting for only 7% of its total area, and in particular is host to a thriving viticultural industry.⁶⁶² It is possible that in the Roman period the Maritsa River, unlike today when it is only navigable as far as Adrianople, also provided access to Adrianople and the Aegean beyond, with Roman coins displaying depictions of merchantmen plying the river having been uncovered in the city.⁶⁶³

Medieval visitors to Philippopolis often remarked upon the agricultural wealth of the region. Odo of Deuil stated that the land '*abounds in all kinds of good things*' and reported a '*rich, wide, pleasant plain*',⁶⁶⁴ whilst *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg* exclaimed that '*the level plains around Philippopolis is full of vines and all sorts of good things*'.⁶⁶⁵ After the city's conquest by the Kieven Rus

⁶⁶⁰ Lucian, *The Runaways*, translated by H. W. Fowler & F. G. Fowler, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, Vol. 4 (Oxford, 1905), p. 103.

⁶⁶¹ Biernacka-Lubanska, *The Roman and early-Byzantine fortifications of lower Moesia and northern Thrace*, p. 34.

⁶⁶² Beshkov, 'The upper Thracian plain in Bulgarian agriculture', p. 179.

⁶⁶³ Archibald, *The Odrysian Kingdom of Thrace*, p. 13-4.

⁶⁶⁴ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 33.

⁶⁶⁵ Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, p. 151.

in 971, Skylitzes remarked that they were '*so charmed by the fertility of the land*' that despite a subsequent treaty with Byzantium '*they thought it would be to their advantage to remain in that country and take control of the land.*'⁶⁶⁶

Similarly, Bertrandon de La Brocquière, visiting the city in 1433, remarked that '*it is situated in a plain of the Mariza (sic), in an excellent country where all sorts of provisions are sold very cheap. It was formerly a formidable town, and indeed is so now.*'⁶⁶⁷ Gabriel d'Aramon even claimed that, in the mid-sixteenth century, rice grown in the region supplied all the provinces of the Ottoman Empire as far as Baghdad.⁶⁶⁸ Certainly under Ottoman rule the city flourished as an important regional centre.⁶⁶⁹

After the long and difficult journey from the Danube, the Maritsa Valley therefore provided welcome relief for hungry crusaders, and Philippopolis was able to offer much needed provisions. Odo of Deuil also speaks of a Latin settlement near Philippopolis that provided market services, '*Outside the walls of Philippopolis was located a fine settlement of Latins who sold a great many supplies to travellers.*'⁶⁷⁰ It is not clear if this represented a permanent settlement or a temporary initiative undertaken by foreign merchants to trade with the passing crusaders, as no other source makes mention of it, however Laiou argues that its existence proves that in the mid-twelfth century Philippopolis was an important location for the distribution of local agricultural produce, a role the city has played throughout much of its long history.⁶⁷¹

The *Via Militaris* left Philippopolis by the north gate and then crossed the Maritsa River. This represents the one major deviation between the Roman and Ottoman routes of the *Via Militaris*, as the Ottoman road left the city by the east gate and proceeded towards Adrianople along the southern bank of the Maritsa. These two different routes have created no small amount of confusion, and Jireček mistakenly locates Roman road stations to the south of the Maritsa, along what was the Ottoman road. The two roads would remain divided until they both reached the outskirts of the modern Bulgarian city of Svilengrad, some 150 kilometres distant, and close to where the Bulgarian-Turkish border lies today.

There are three potential reasons to explain why the two routes differed so markedly in this region. The first is that by travelling north of the Maritsa, the Roman road ran closer to the passes through the Central Balkan Mountains, and therefore provided greater access to the forts covering those

⁶⁶⁶ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, p. 275.

⁶⁶⁷ B. de La Brocquière, *Le Voyage d'Outremer*, p. 268.

⁶⁶⁸ J. Chesneau, *Le voyage de Monsieur d'Aramon, ambassadeur pour le Roy en Levant*, p. 14.

⁶⁶⁹ Evliya Celebi, *The Book of Travels*, trans. J. Von Hammer, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa in the seventeenth century* (London, 1834), p. 90.

⁶⁷⁰ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 43.

⁶⁷¹ Laiou, 'Regional networks in the Balkans in the Middle and Late Byzantine Periods', p. 134.

passes, and the legionary barracks located beyond on the Danube. The second is that by travelling along the northern bank, Roman engineers avoided the necessity of bridging the many tributaries that flow from the Rhodope Mountains and enter the Maritsa from the south. As noted previously, Roman roads sought to limit bridge construction wherever possible. The Ottoman road, instead, simply crossed all of these tributaries in turn, and the route today, which is closely followed by the main road leading to the Turkish border (the E-8) features a steady procession of iconic Ottoman humpbacked bridges (Figure 69).



Figure 69: Ottoman humpbacked bridge, bridging the Harmanliyska River, a tributary of the Maritsa, in modern Harmanli.

Whilst the route of the Ottoman road was subsequently far more direct than that which the Roman road had followed, it also was in constant risk of inundation, and until the Maritsa was dammed in the early twentieth century the road was frequently subjected to flash floods that threatened both the road and the modern railroad, which ran in parallel along its southern bank.⁶⁷² Indeed the humpback

⁶⁷² Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 29.

bridges that are so prevalent in this region were specifically designed to give as free a passage as possible to flood water.⁶⁷³ The Maritsa River itself, which is fed by snow melts in the Rila Mountains, is typically extremely marshy along its banks, and the bed of the river, which consists of sand, pebbles and shingle, shifts its course constantly.⁶⁷⁴ The third reason, therefore, why Roman engineers preferred to avoid the more direct route is that given that Roman roads required such solid foundations, these marshy region were entirely unsuited to their construction (Figure 70).



Figure 70: The Route of the Ottoman road, between Philippopolis and Harmanli, running along the southern bank of the Maritsa River. From Kiepert, *General-Karte von der europäischen Türkei: nach allen vorhandenen Originalkarten und itinerarischen Hilfsmitteln*.

No remains of the Roman bridge over the Maritsa at Philippopolis have been discovered, although Madzharov suggests that it must have been located near to the site of a modern pedestrian bridge (Figure 71). The road then ran along the northern bank of the Maritsa in the direction of the modern village of Manole, in the environs of which was located a station, the *mutatio* Sernota, although its exact location is not known.⁶⁷⁵ The *Via Militaris* continued running due east, parallel to the Maritsa, to the next station, the *mutatio* Preamble. This station has been identified as sitting 4 kilometres to the south east of the modern village of Belozem, and at this site a considerable length of the road could be observed in the early twentieth century.⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁷³ Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, p. 63.

⁶⁷⁴ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 29.

⁶⁷⁵ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 98.

⁶⁷⁶ Ivanov ed., *Tabula Imperii Romani, K35/2 Philippopolis*, p. 282.



Figure 71: The modern pedestrian bridge over the Maritsa, where the Roman bridge is thought to have been located.

Both the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* and *Antonini Augusti* state that the next station was the *mansio* Cillis, however the *Tabula Peutingerina* instead lists Ranilum as the next station. This has engendered a great deal of debate, and no clear answer as to where Ranilum lay, or if it was the same station as Cillis, exists (Figure 72). Little is known of Cillis itself either, and it is thought to have perhaps been located on the site of the modern rail station in the village of Cherna Gora.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁷ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 101.

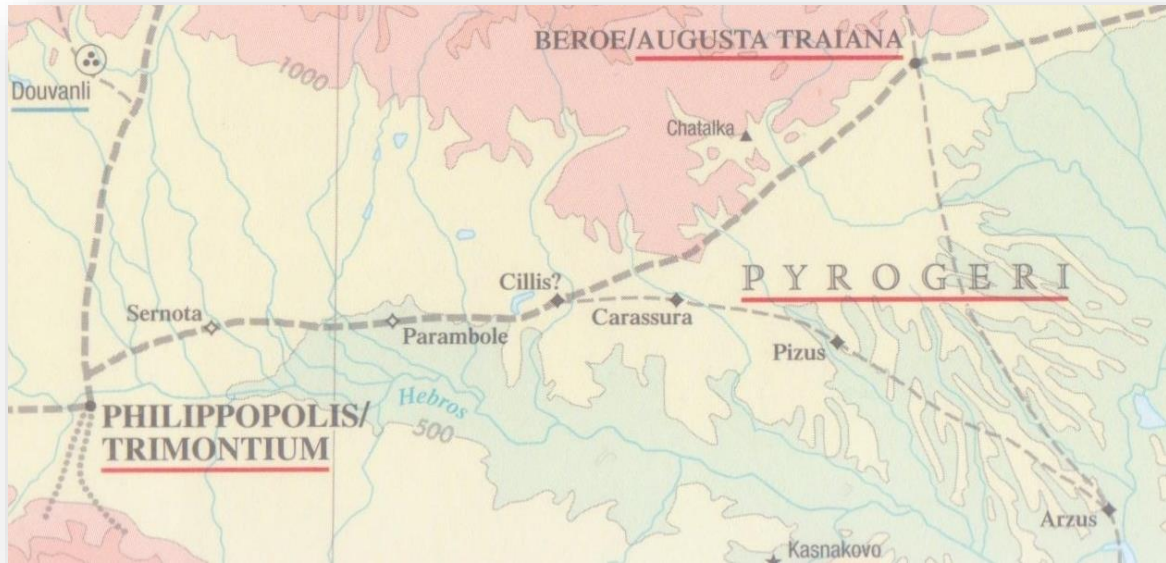


Figure 72: Route of the *Via Militaris* from Philippopolis from the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*. The branch north to Beroe is here represented as being located at Cillis.

The road then proceeded almost due east, past the modern town of Chirpan, to the *mutatio* Karasura. From here a branch in the road connected the *Via Militaris* with the city of Beroe (modern Stara Zagora) to the north. The ruins at the site of the road station have been extensively excavated by a joint German-Bulgarian team that found that Karasura was fortified in the fourth century with walls over two metres thick, and contained two early Christian basilicas.⁶⁷⁸ Devastated by the Goths in the fifth century, it was rebuilt by Justinian, and retains evidence of settlement dating to as late as the fourteenth century.⁶⁷⁹ Karasura, therefore, emerges as a key location along the *Via Militaris*, protecting the crossroad to Beroe, as well as providing a position from which to guard against raiders entering into the Maritsa Valley through the Central Balkan Mountain passes to the north (see Figures 73 & 74).

⁶⁷⁸ Wendel, *Karasura. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des alten Thrakien*, p. 5-11.

⁶⁷⁹ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, p. 301-2.

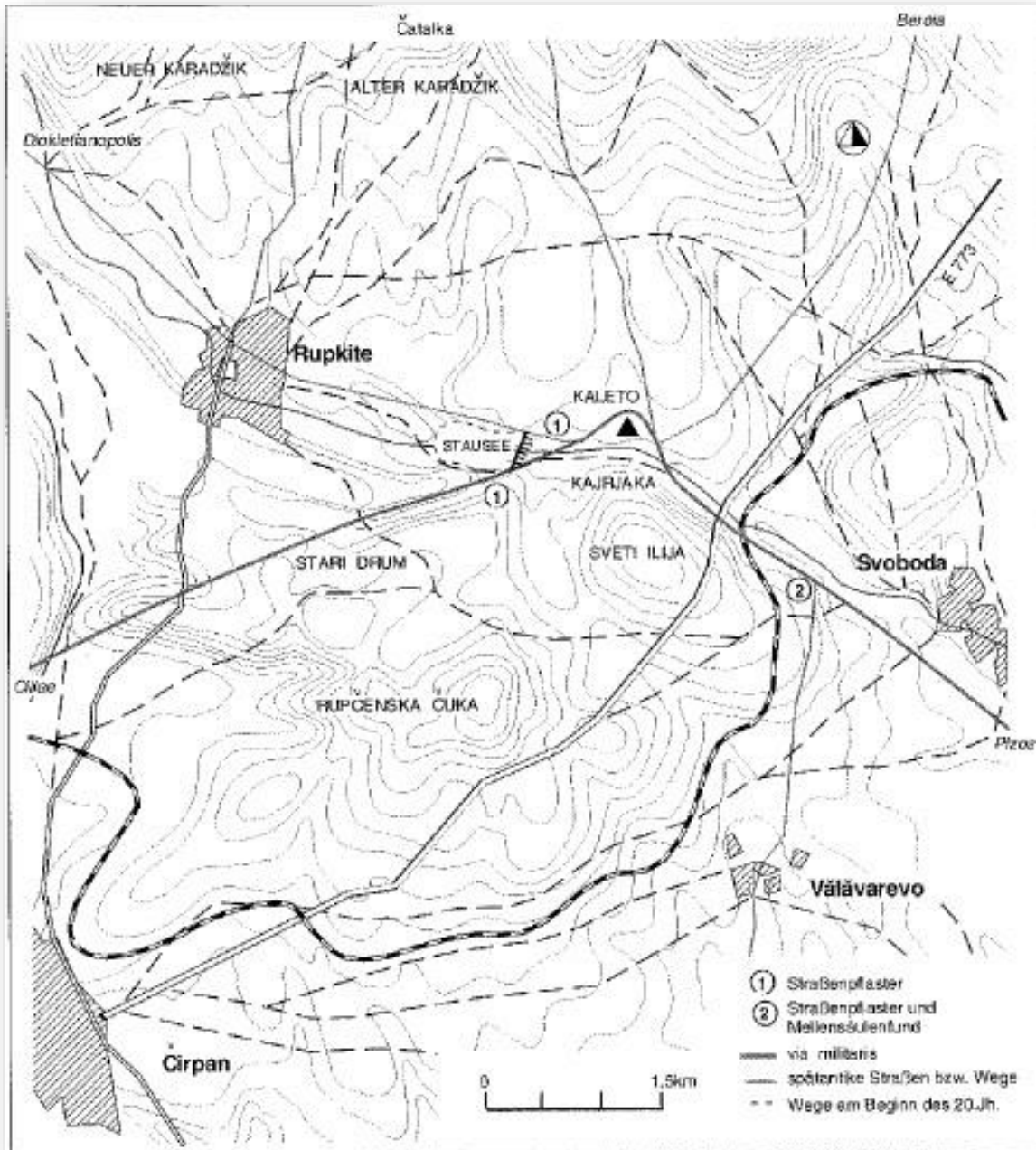


Figure 73: The route of the *Via Militaris* as it passes Karasura and turns to the south-east. From Wendel, *Karasura. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des alten Thrakien*, p. 6.

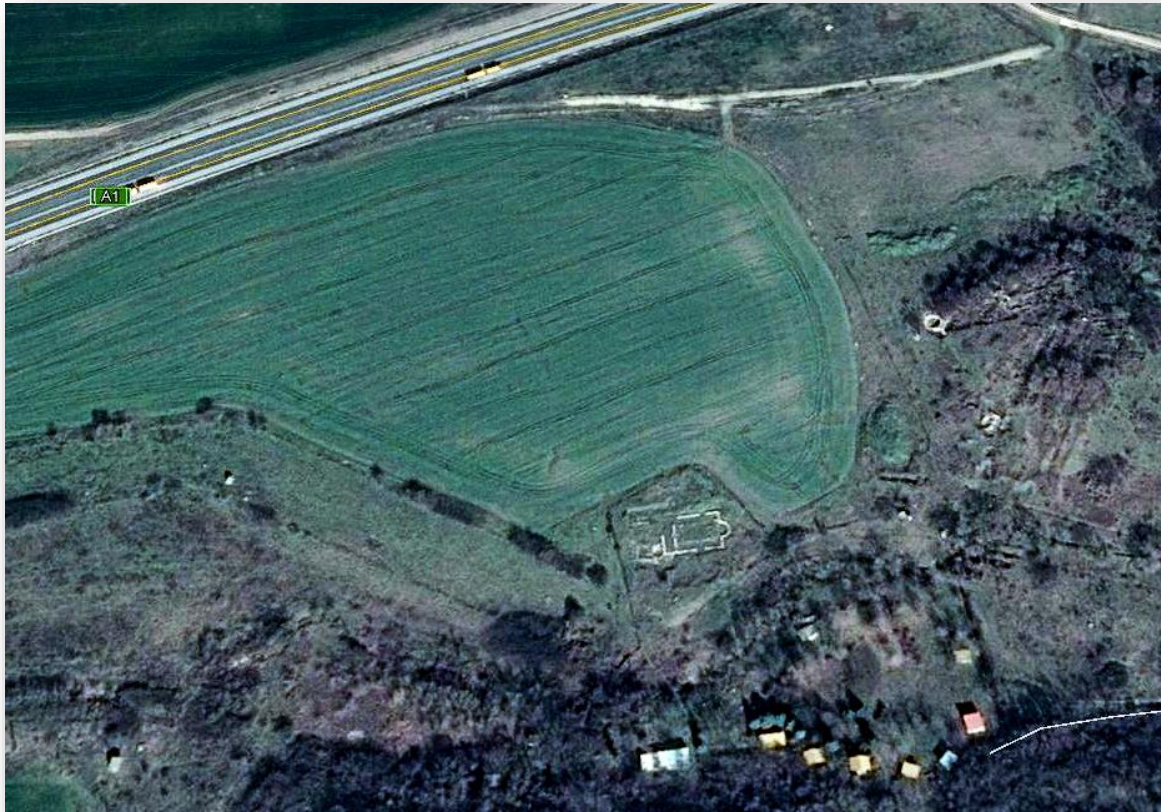


Figure 74: Remains of the uncovered basilica on the site of Karasura are clearly visible from above today. The modern 'Trakia' Highway passes the site just to the north. Image captured via Google Earth.

From Karasura the *Via Militaris* angled to the south-east, and followed an almost entirely straight line till it reached the outskirts of the modern town of Svilengrad, where the Ottoman and Roman roads reunited and proceeded to the city of Adrianople. Along this length of the *Via Militaris* the *Tabula Peutingerina* names four stations; Pizos, Arzum, Castra Rubra and Burdenis. The *Antonini Augusti* also names four stations; Opizo, Arso, Subzupara, and Burdipta. The *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, however, presents a slightly different picture, naming three *mansiones*; Arzum, Castozobra, and Burdista, and two *mutatio*; Palae and Rhamis (Figure 75).

The first station after Karasura was the *mansio* Pizos, which has been located on a hill to the north-east of the modern village of Dimitrievio, approximately 25 kilometres from the town of Chirpan. Pizos was a notable ancient *emporium*, and an inscription discovered at the site provides information not only on its founding, during the reign of the co-emperors Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius (161-169 AD), but also of its 171 original settlers, who were drawn from nearby Thracian towns.⁶⁸⁰ The

⁶⁸⁰ Hoddinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity*, p. 206.

inscription further describes how the marketplace was established, funded, fortified and guarded. Archaeological evidence indicates that this marketplace was destroyed in the middle of the third century by Gothic raiders, and Justinian afterwards raised a fortification on the site.⁶⁸¹

⁶⁸¹ Ivanov ed., *Tabula Imperii Romani, K35/2 Philippopolis*, p. 301.

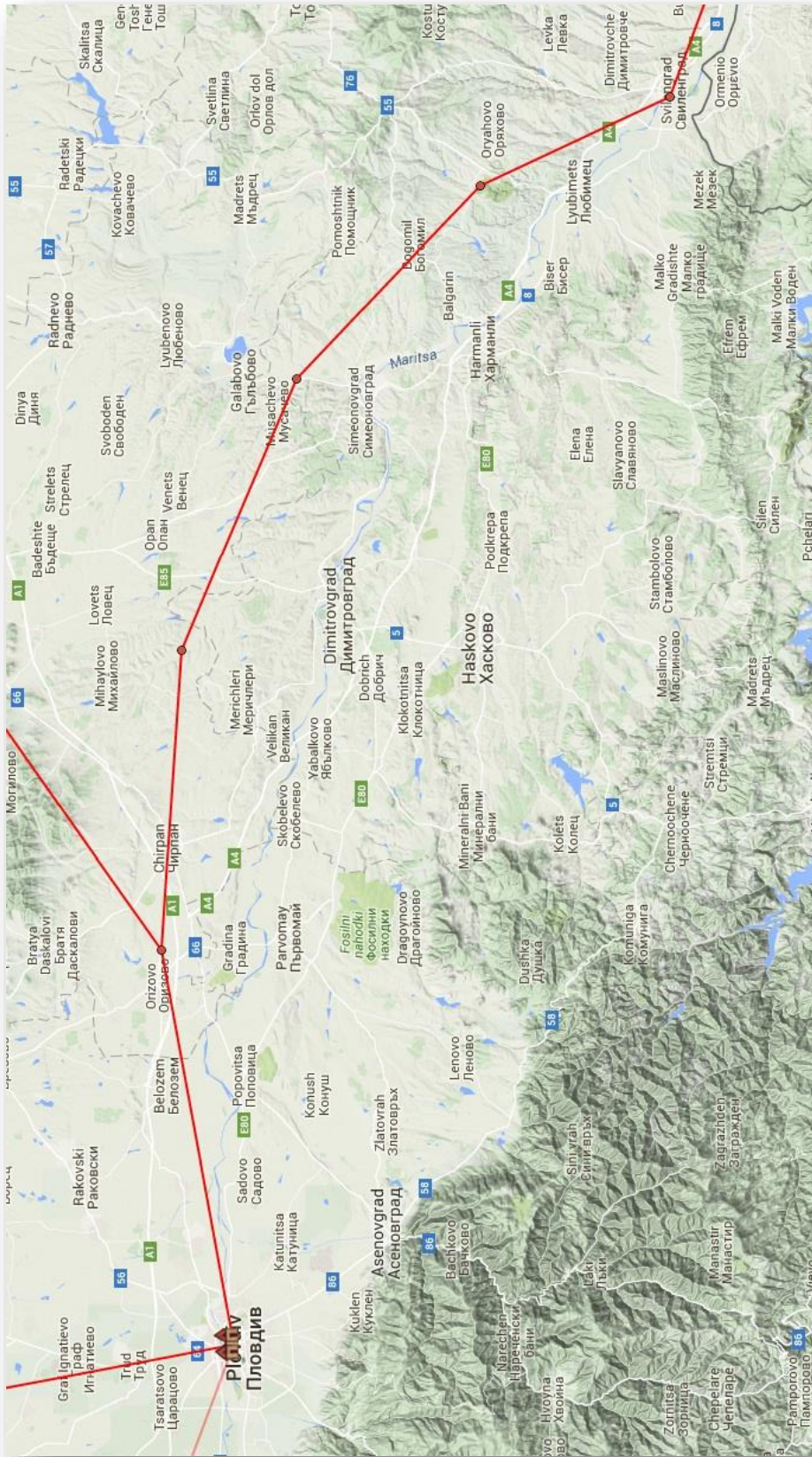


Figure 75: This recreation of the route of the *Via Militaris* attempts to drape the route of the road between Philippiopolis and Burdenis over a modern topographical map. From <http://omnesviae.org/>

The next station, Arzum, has been located as lying on the Sazliyka River, a northern tributary of the Maritsa River that flows from the Sredna Gora Mountains and enters the Maritsa near the modern town of Simeonovgrad, some two kilometres to the south. Excavations at the site unearthed pottery fragments and coins dating from the third to the fifth centuries.⁶⁸² In the medieval period an important town known as Konstanteia existed on this site, containing evidence of settlement until at least the beginning of the thirteenth century. In the late nineteenth century the remains of two medieval fortresses, with walls three metres thick, were uncovered, with the road running directly between them.⁶⁸³ The remains of a six metre wide bridge across the Sazliyka River were also identified.⁶⁸⁴ This may also correspond to the town of Blisnos, or Blisnus, mentioned by Anna Comnena in the *Alexiad* as being located on or near to the Maritsa River, and close to the city of Philippopolis.⁶⁸⁵ As discussed above, it is also mentioned in the *Historia de Expeditione* as being a town visited by the crusaders as they marched towards Adrianople, and was located three days march from Philippopolis.⁶⁸⁶

The next station, Castra Rubra, is one of the best known sites along the entire route of the *Via Militaris*. This site, which is approximately seven kilometres south-west of the town of Izvorovo, was the subject of extensive excavations in 2007 (see Figures 76-78).⁶⁸⁷ As a result sections of the fortifications there have been uncovered, indicating an irregular pentagonal fortress defended by rectangular towers, which was constructed either in the late fifth or early sixth century.⁶⁸⁸ Procopius mentions the fortress as one of those restored by Justinian, naming it Castrazarba.⁶⁸⁹ The fortress was sacked during the invasions of the early seventh century, rebuilt and then sacked again during the invasion of Khan Krum in the early ninth, at which point it was abandoned for good.⁶⁹⁰ However a further settlement was subsequently raised upon the site, dating from the first half of the ninth century, from which were uncovered pottery remains, which represent a wide variety of ceramic traditions and date to as late as the middle Byzantine period, as well as copper coins dating to the reign John Tzimiskes. From these finds Borisov surmises that this new settlement was populated by a wide variety of different ethnic groups.⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸² Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 113.

⁶⁸³ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, p. 314.

⁶⁸⁴ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 114.

⁶⁸⁵ Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, p. 166. Also see Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, p. 210.

⁶⁸⁶ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 80.

⁶⁸⁷ B. Borisov, 'Excavations at Castra Rubra', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 114 (October, 2010), p. 724-6.

⁶⁸⁸ Ivanov ed., *Tabula Imperii Romani, K35/2 Philippopolis*, p. 74.

⁶⁸⁹ Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, p. 309.

⁶⁹⁰ Borisov, 'Excavations at Castra Rubra', p. 725.

⁶⁹¹ Borisov, 'Excavations at Castra Rubra', p. 725.



Figure 76: Excavated remains of the station Castra Rubra.



Figure 77: Further detail of the remains of Castra Rubra



Figure 78: As part of the excavation of Castra Rubra a short section of the *Via Militaris* was reconstructed. It is today quite overgrown.

The *Via Militaris*, which had run in a straight line to the south-east since the station of Karasura, now veered further to the south, in the direction of the Maritsa. Madzharov notes that part of the road's surface can still be seen to the east of the town of Yerusolimovo.⁶⁹² It then passed the *mutatio* Rhamis, the location of which is not known but is presumed to lie to the north of the town of Lyubimets, which sits on the banks of the Maritsa, in a series of hills known as Hissar. Here remains dating back to 3000 BC have been discovered, as well as ruins of a fortification, and ceramics dating to as late as the thirteenth century.⁶⁹³ Madzharov, however, argues that the original station must have lain closer to the village of Momkovo, as the ruins at Hisar are located nearly five kilometres to the west of the road, and therefore too distant to have been a station along its route.⁶⁹⁴

⁶⁹² Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 124.

⁶⁹³ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, p. 338.

⁶⁹⁴ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 124-6.

From the station of Rhamis the road ran parallel to the northern bank of the Maritsa River. Remains of the road can still be seen some 800 metres to south of the village of Momkovo, and here also have been discovered *milliaria*.⁶⁹⁵ The *Via Militaris* must have run, therefore, close to and likely parallel to the route of the modern Maritza Highway. On the outskirts of the town of Svilengrad, in the heights to the north known as 'Hisarya', sat the station of Burdenis. The site is currently unexcavated, but the remains of fortress walls are still visible, and these may belong to the fortress of Burdepto mentioned by Procopius. The position would have afforded a clear line of sight across the Thracian plain in the direction of Adrianople, which lay 20 Roman miles distant, and it has been suggested, based on scattered ceramic and jewellery fragments found at the site, that it remained occupied till the fourteenth century.⁶⁹⁶

The final station within the borders of modern Bulgaria is the *mutatio* Daphabae mentioned by the *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, and it has been identified as existing near the border town of Kapitan Andreevo. Approximately four kilometres to the west of the modern town was discovered a *milliaria*, dated to the reign of Emperor Alexander Severus (222-235), that states that the city of Adrianople was 12 Roman miles distant. Based on this evidence, Madzharov believes that the station Daphabae must have been located close to the site where the *milliaria* was discovered.⁶⁹⁷

From here the *Via Militaris* continued to closely follow the northern bank of the Maritsa River as it approached Adrianople. The city of Adrianople, modern day Edirne, sits at the confluence of the Maritsa and Tundzha Rivers, and the Tundzha River is bridged as the road approaches the city from the west. A bridge, dating from the reign of Emperor Michael Palaiologos (1261-1282) is known to have existed on this site, and was subsequently restored in 1420 by Gazi Mihal Bey, whose name the bridge now carries (Gazi Mihal Bridge), and is the oldest bridge in Edirne (Figure 79).⁶⁹⁸ Another bridge likely crossed the Maritsa and an alternate road ran south along it, via Didymoteicho, to the important Byzantine city of Traianoupolis and the *Via Egnatia*.⁶⁹⁹

⁶⁹⁵ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 126.

⁶⁹⁶ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, p. 224.

⁶⁹⁷ Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 128-9.

⁶⁹⁸ I. S. Canitez, T. Canitez, & N. Ilhan, 'The bridges of Edirne: comprehensive buildings for the lecture of the city', *Trakia Journal of Sciences*, 7 (2009), p. 226.

⁶⁹⁹ C. Bakirtzis, 'Byzantine Thrace (AD 330-1453)', in G. Selimis ed., *Thrace* (Athens, 1994), p. 199.



Figure 79: The Gazi Mihal Bridge, leading into modern Edirne. Photo obtained from <http://wikimapia.org/94974/Gazi-Mihal-Köprüsü> (accessed 22/1/2016).

The most important question governing the route between Philippopolis and Adrianople is whether or not the Byzantine road followed that of the earlier Roman road, to the north of the Maritsa River, or the later Ottoman route to the south of the river. The archaeological evidence is mixed, and suggests settlements existed both north and south of the Maritsa between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, such as the important fortress of Makrolibada, mentioned in the peace treaty of 816, which nestled in the foothills of the Rhodope Mountains.⁷⁰⁰ Certainly by the sixteenth century the road south of the Maritsa was in use; Hans Dernschwam followed this route in 1553, although he complained the road was poorly made and few villages lay along it.⁷⁰¹ However as noted above, also in the mid-sixteenth century, Ogier de Busbecq made the journey between Philippopolis and Adrianople, and explicitly states that the Maritsa was kept to the right of the road, with the Central Balkan Mountains on the travellers left. It is likely that some travellers preferred the older well-beaten paths to the main roads as they were easier to travel on and probably had the additional benefit of avoiding the worst

⁷⁰⁰ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, p. 343.

⁷⁰¹ Dernschwam, *Ein Fugger-Kaufmann im Osmanischen Reich*, p. 29.

of the marshy, mosquito infested, land along the Maritsa. Depictions of the route of the medieval *Via Militaris* in maps of this region, therefore, tend to vary between the northern and southern banks of the Maritsa (Figure 80).

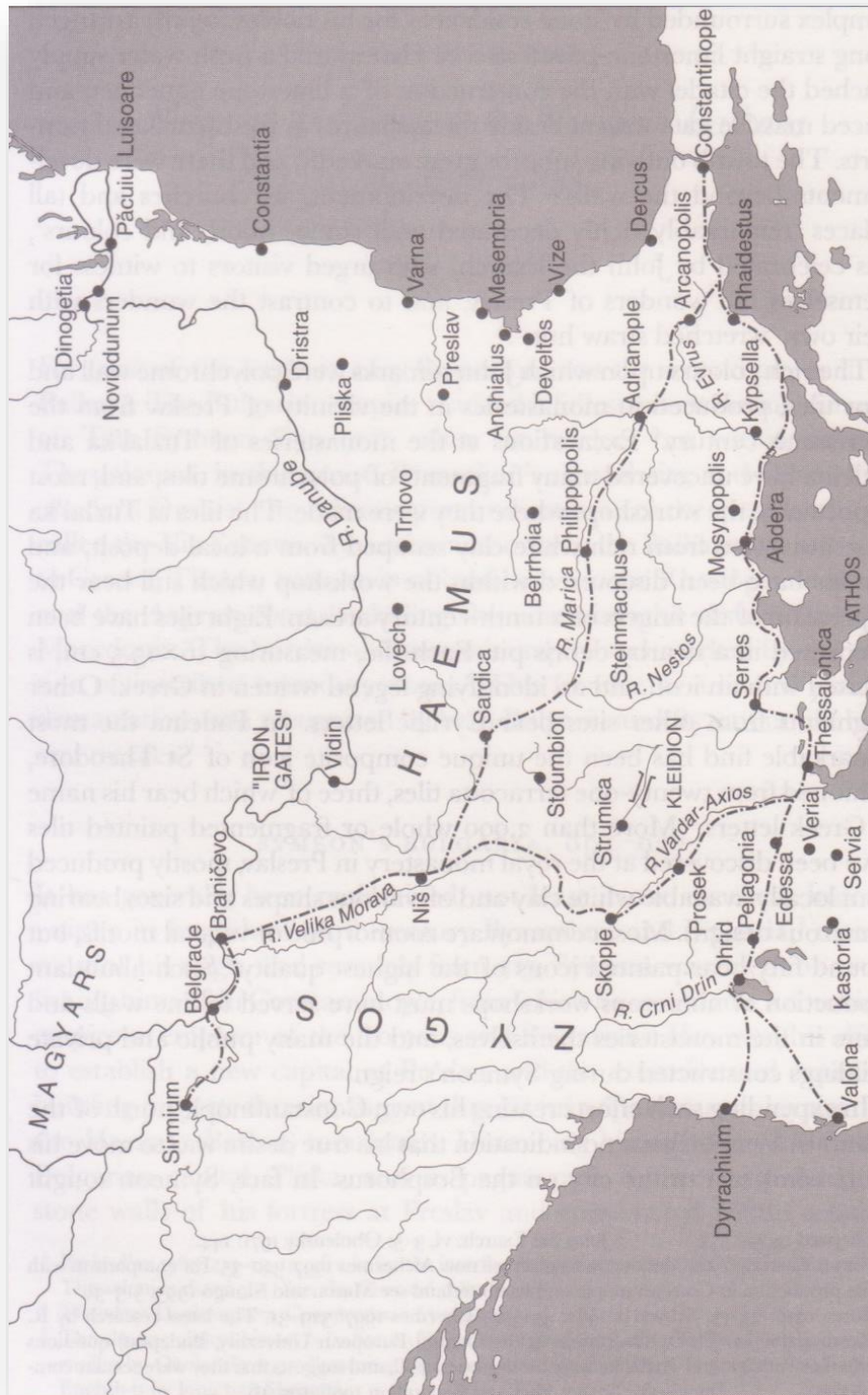


Figure 80: For instance, this representation of the medieval Balkans, from Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 20, depicts the route of the *Via Militaris* as proceeding along the southern bank of the Maritsa.

The importance of guarding the passes through the Central Balkan Mountains argues for the retention of a road north of the Maritsa, as this would allow the quickest deployment of troops from Adrianople or Philippopolis to these regions when threatened. This does not suggest that a road did not also exist south of the Maritsa at this time, only that there were important strategic arguments for the retention of the original Roman route.

The mountain passes through the Central Balkan Mountains were of critical importance to the security of the Maritsa Valley, and Byzantium certainly kept a close guard over them, as with the abandonment of the Moesian plain they represented the empire's first line of defence from barbarian incursions from the north. In 1092, for instance, Alexius Comnenus sought to keep close guard over these passes in order to prevent their passage by an invading Cuman force.⁷⁰² In this Alexius was defeated through the duplicity of the native Vlachs, who provided guides to lead the Cumans through unoccupied passes. The Vlachs had likely been deliberately settled in the region in order to guard the mountain passes, but their subsequent untrustworthiness in this role would provide a constant cause for concern.⁷⁰³

A further point arguing for the retention of a road to the north of the Maritsa River is the restoration of the city of Beroe by the Empress Irene in 784, at which point she renamed the city after herself; Irenopolis.⁷⁰⁴ It is believed that Beroe was likely abandoned after an Avar or Slavic attack sometime in the sixth century, although archaeological remains suggest it may have retained a small population.⁷⁰⁵ Velkov argues that the city continued to exist and survived the turmoils of the sixth century, in at least some form.⁷⁰⁶ Irene certainly restored the city's walls, as archaeological surveys, in particular of the southern gate, attest, and it likely thereafter remained an important outpost guarding the northern approaches to Thrace.⁷⁰⁷

Beroe could be reached from the Black Sea via a road from Anchialos, and this is the road which Irene took in the late eighth century.⁷⁰⁸ It was then further linked to Philippopolis via another road which met the *Via Militaris* at Karasura. As such it was tightly integrated into the logistical network of the region and formed an important linchpin in the defence of the northern Maritsa Valley and the

⁷⁰² Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 239.

⁷⁰³ Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 104-5.

⁷⁰⁴ Theophanes, *Chronicle*, p. 143.

⁷⁰⁵ Hoddinott, *Bulgaria in Antiquity*, p. 312-5.

⁷⁰⁶ Velkov, *The cities in Thrace and Dacia in Late Antiquity*, p. 286.

⁷⁰⁷ N. Sharankov & D. Yankov, 'A 784 AD Inscription of Constantine VI and Irene from Beroe-Irenopolis (modern Stara Zagora, South Bulgaria)', *Archaeologia Bulgarica*, 12 (2008).

⁷⁰⁸ Evidence indicates this road had remained in use until at least the late sixth century, see Beševliev, 'Bemerkungen über die Antiken Heeresstrassen im Ostteil der Balkanhalbinsel', p. 486. Also Laiou, 'Regional networks in the Balkans in the Middle and Late Byzantine Periods', p. 128.

mountain passes beyond. The roads leading to it would, therefore, likely have remained in use at least until the late twelfth century when, during the passage of the Third Crusade, a detachment of crusaders, *en route* to Adrianople from Philippopolis, plundered the city of everything of worth, and then committed the rest to flames.⁷⁰⁹

Soustal suggests that as the older Roman road fell into disuse and began to lose its identity, the shorter and more direct route along the south of the river came to be preferred.⁷¹⁰ With the available evidence it is impossible to clearly determine at what point this occurred. Such a clear cut distinction is likely unreachable for, as has been seen with the example provided by Ogier de Busbecq, even when the southern road was in active use, some travellers still preferred the northern. As Koder notes, based on evidence in Asia Minor, the decline of Roman roads did not usually result in road relocation, and unless there were compelling reasons to do so, such as dramatic changes to the natural landscape, regional and trans-regional routes typically remained constant during the Byzantine period.⁷¹¹ The Byzantines were capable of utilising alternate roads, but after the sixth century there is little evidence of them constructing entirely new routes. It therefore seems likely that the route of the *Via Militaris* remained on the northern bank of the Maritsa until such time as the Ottoman Empire, with its greater resources, constructed the new route sometime in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.

11.7: Adrianople

The Roman city of Adrianople was established by Emperor Hadrian in 123-124, who delineated the extent of its new walls on the site of an existing Greek settlement. This site encompassed some 36 hectares and became, in time, an important city along the *Via Militaris*, forming both a key location along the route, and an administrative and ecclesiastical centre for the Thracian region. The *notitiae episcopatum ecclesiae constantinopolitanae*, which ranked the metropolitan and suffragan bishoprics of the church, listed Adrianople as only 36th out of 38 metropolises in the seventh century, but, likely swelled by refugees from elsewhere in the Balkans, the city grew in importance, and the number of suffragan bishoprics within the city increased from five in the seventh century, to eleven in the tenth.⁷¹² With this increase in prominence the city experienced a commensurate expansion in size,

⁷⁰⁹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 88.

⁷¹⁰ Soustal, *Thrakien (Thrakē, Rodopē und Haimimontos)*, p. 572.

⁷¹¹ J. Koder, 'Regional networks in Asia Minor during the Middle Byzantine Period', in C. Morrisson ed., *Trade and Markets in Byzantium* (Washington D.C., 2012), p. 152-3.

⁷¹² On Balkan cities and the *notitiae episcopatum*, see Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300–1450*, p. 76-7.

to cover near 100 hectares, and it would ultimately reach its apogee in the fourteenth century, when it became the capital of the burgeoning Ottoman Empire.⁷¹³

One reason for the city's emergence as a key strategic and administrative centre was its location not only on the *Via Militaris*, but also on the Maritsa River, which is navigable by flat bottomed barges from Adrianople till it enters the Aegean. In the Ottoman period such barges were used to convey rice and other crops to Constantinople, and it's highly likely such craft were used in the Roman period as well.⁷¹⁴ Adrianople was also host to a sizeable arms workshop industry in the late Roman period, although virtually nothing is known of its production after the seventh century.⁷¹⁵

The city attracted the praise of medieval visitors for its agricultural wealth. The *Historia peregrinorum* relates that it was '*an admirable and famous city, both from the suitability of its site and from the fertility of the nearby regions. Although it is defended on the western and southern sides by the waters of two rivers flowing through, it lies further strengthened by walls and towers on the outside, while inside the height of its palatial buildings appears to tower over these*'.⁷¹⁶ Major exports from the city were cotton and linen, which were suited to the local environment, which is characterised by largely barren hills and extremely hot summers, more typical of the Mediterranean than the more protected Maritsa Valley region. Michael Attaleiates also mentions the cultivated fields and vineyards that surrounded the city in the mid-eleventh century.⁷¹⁷

Not only was Adrianople an important city for its connections to the south and east, but also to the north, towards the Central Balkan Mountains. Between Adrianople and the Black Sea lies the Istrandja region (or Strandzha in Bulgarian), a series of low, heavily forested rolling hills that historically have contained extremely poor communications and proved exceptionally difficult to move an army through.⁷¹⁸ Even today the region is notable for the absence of major roads. To reach the Black Sea coast, or the eastern fringes of the Central Balkan Mountains, from Constantinople, it was more convenient to come as far inland as Adrianople, or in the late Ottoman period the important frontier city of Kirkilisse, before turning to the north and then to the east.⁷¹⁹ Adrianople has, consequently, been a key battleground throughout history, from the Roman period right through to the Balkan Wars of the early twentieth century.

⁷¹³ Canitez, *et al*, 'The bridges of Edirne: comprehensive buildings for the lecture of the city', p.221-2.

⁷¹⁴ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *A handbook of Bulgaria*, p. 29.

⁷¹⁵ Haldon, 'The organization and support of an expeditionary force; manpower and logistics in the Middle Byzantine period', p. 142.

⁷¹⁶ *Historia peregrinorum*, p. 146.

⁷¹⁷ Attaleiates, *The History*, p. 59.

⁷¹⁸ Archibald, *The Odryian Kingdom of Thrace*, p. 14.

⁷¹⁹ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Handbook of Turkey in Europe*, p. 12.

11.8: Thrace

Given the importance of Thrace in the history of the Mediterranean at large, it is surprising that so little is known of the historical geography of this region. The routes of the two major roads that crossed it, the *Via Militaris* and *Via Egnatia*, are known only in part, and educated guesses must be made for much of their course.⁷²⁰ Remains of the road surface itself are scarce, and few *milliaria* have been recovered in this region. The route of the *Via Militaris*, therefore, must largely be derived from the remains of stations and the impressions of Early Modern European travellers in the region. Much like the course of the *Via Militaris* along the Morava Valley, this makes it difficult to recognise deviations or alternate routes. The general route of the road, however, is not difficult to discern, and would have closely matched the existing highway to Istanbul today, covering a distance of approximately 320 kilometres between Edirne and Istanbul.⁷²¹ As the British Naval Intelligence survey of Turkey describes it, the road from Adrianople to Constantinople via Silivri follows the natural line of approach to the capital, avoiding the Istrandja Mountains to the north, and largely following the course of the Ergene River, a major tributary of the Maritsa.⁷²²

In the early Byzantine era, up till the death of Justinian, Thrace was a rich region, containing no less than 14 cities and a further 24 minor settlements.⁷²³ As with elsewhere in the Balkans, from the eighth and ninth century onwards many of the towns came to take on new Byzantine names, likely reflecting their changing identities in the midst of a general decline in population.⁷²⁴ Nevertheless, it was still a relatively productive region agriculturally, containing vast areas of pastures and meadows, fertile hills, a rich riverine system and extended coastal areas.⁷²⁵ Much of the produce of this region, in particular its wheat crop, helped feed the teeming masses of the imperial capital, and Skylitzes makes mention of an annual fair, which was held at public expense, which operated in Adrianople.⁷²⁶

⁷²⁰ A. Külzer, 'The Byzantine road system in eastern Thrace: some remarks', in C. Bakirtzis, N. Zekos & X. Moniaros eds., *Byzantine Thrace: evidence and remains, Komotini 18-22 April 2007* (Amsterdam, 2011), p. 179-80. Perhaps the best overview of the road network of Thrace until the 7th century is provided by Beševliev, 'Bemerkungen über die Antiken Heeresstrassen im Ostteil der Balkanhalbinsel'.

⁷²¹ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Handbook of Turkey in Europe*, p. 283.

⁷²² Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Handbook of Turkey in Europe*, p. 24.

⁷²³ Hierocles, *Synekdemos*, trans. E. Honingman, *Le Synekdemosis d'Hiérocles et l'Opusculum géographique de Georges de Chypre* (Brussels, 1939), p. 12.

⁷²⁴ Bakirtzis, 'Byzantine Thrace (AD 330-1453)', p. 157-8.

⁷²⁵ D. Drakoulis, 'European and Asiatic Settlements of the Bosphorus Hinterland in the Early Byzantine Period', in G. R. Tsetskhladze et al. eds., *The Bosphorus: Gateway between the Ancient West and East (1st Millennium BC–5th Century AD) Proceedings of the Fourth International Congress on Black Sea Antiquities Istanbul, 14th–18th September 2009* (Oxford, 2013), p. 238.

⁷²⁶ Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, p. 328.

From Adrianople the road proceeded almost due south-east, with the first station along its length being Nike, modern Havsa. The *Historia de Expeditione* mentions this location as the castle of Nikiz, and notes that the region was famous for its resinated wine, or more accurately infamous during the crusading period, as the crusaders often mistook the strange tasting concoction as a form of poison.⁷²⁷ The next station was Bulgarophygon, ancient Bourtoudizos, on the site of modern Babaeski.⁷²⁸ The town here played an important role during the Ottoman period as a collection point for local produce, such as grain, cheese and eggs, destined for export to the capital.⁷²⁹

The road then led to Arcadiopolis, modern Lüleburgaz, one of the largest towns of medieval Thrace, and approximately 80 kilometres to the west of Constantinople. It is said to be located in the best grain growing district along the Ergene River.⁷³⁰ The city evidently retained strong fortifications, rebuilt by Justinian, as in 969 an imperial army, led by Bardas Skeleros, took refuge in it from a much larger force of raiding Kieven Rus, along with their Pecheneg allies.⁷³¹ A detachment of Barbarossa's force, led by the Duke of Swabia, sacked the city whilst the crusaders were wintering in nearby Adrianople, and found it abandoned by its inhabitants, and otherwise empty save for some stocks of corn and wine.⁷³²

Arcadiopolis evidently sat in the centre of a network of communications governing Byzantine Thrace. In 775 Emperor Constantine V, at the head of an army with which he intended to invade Bulgaria, reached the city before he succumbed to the effects of fever, which compelled him to withdraw back down the road to Selymbria.⁷³³ To the north was Bizye, not only an important fortress guarding the northern approaches to Thrace, but also a cult centre dedicated to Saint Mary the Younger.⁷³⁴ An inscription, dated to 773/4, details repairs made to a bridge along a nearby road, possibly that which linked the two cities.⁷³⁵ Not only does this argue for the existence of secondary roads linking the *Via Militaris* to fortresses to the north, but also that Byzantium was actively engaging in road maintenance and bridge repair, at least in the anticipation of major military campaigns, such as Constantine V's aborted expedition against the Bulgars. This is not in itself surprising, as the treatise on military

⁷²⁷ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 81-2.

⁷²⁸ Külzer, 'The Byzantine road system in eastern Thrace: some remarks', p. 181.

⁷²⁹ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Handbook of Turkey in Europe*, p. 202.

⁷³⁰ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Handbook of Turkey in Europe*, p. 203.

⁷³¹ John Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum*, p. 275-6.

⁷³² *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 88.

⁷³³ Theophanes, *Chronicle*, p. 135.

⁷³⁴ F. A. Bauer & H. A. Klein, 'The Church of Hagia Sophia in Bizye (Vize): Results of the Fieldwork Seasons 2003 and 2004', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 60 (Washington D.C., 2006), p. 249.

⁷³⁵ C. Mango, 'Three inscriptions of the reign of Anastasius I and Constantine V', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 65 (1973), p. 391. It is also possible that the bridge was constructed on a secondary road that ran along the Tundzha Valley, see C. Asdracha, 'Inscriptions byzantines de la Thrace orientale (VIIIe – XIe siècles). Présentation et commentaire historique', *Archaiologikon Deltion*, 47 (1992).

campaigns compiled by Constantine VII explicitly calls for the repair of bridges along the army's expected line of march.⁷³⁶ These road networks likely fostered both local and longer distance trade with the capital. Situated at an important crossroads, Arcadiopolis evidently benefited greatly from local trade networks, and Choniates makes mention of its '*wealthy and illustrious residents*' who fled the town ahead of the arrival of a Frankish army in 1205.⁷³⁷

The next station along the route, Narco, is thought to have existed near the modern Turkish village of Evrensekiz.⁷³⁸ The road then reached Druzipara, located at the site of the village of Misinli. The town was an important ecclesiastical centre in the early Byzantine period, and like Arcadiopolis and Bizye was nominated an autocephalous archiepiscopate, and listed in the *Notitiae Episcopatum* as Mesene.⁷³⁹ It also contained a church dedicated to the cult of Saint Alexander, who was martyred here during the reign of Emperor Maximian.⁷⁴⁰ Although much of the ruins in this location remain unexcavated, a bridge to the south-west of the modern town is argued to contain the remnants of older Byzantine construction.⁷⁴¹

From Druzipara the road continued in the same south-easterly course, reaching the *mutatio* Tipsos, located on the banks of the Ergene River. Continuing in the same direction the next station was Izirallo, which in the Byzantine period was known as Tzouroulon (or Tzurulum) and is located at the site of modern Çorlu. Theophanes makes mention of this location as lying along the route of Emperor Michael I Rangabe's march against the Bulgars in 811.⁷⁴² In the ninth century it is known to have been the seat of a *kourator*, an imperial magistrate, held by Sisinnios, who fled the town ahead of the arrival of Bulgar forces, and died in nearby Heraclea in 813.⁷⁴³ Anna Comnena describes it as being in the late eleventh century as variously a '*little town*',⁷⁴⁴ a '*Thracian village*',⁷⁴⁵ and '*a fortified town on a very steep hill*.'⁷⁴⁶ According to Anna's description of a battle that occurred here between Alexius Comnenus and invading Pecheneg forces, the town evidently retained impressive fortifications which

⁷³⁶ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *What should be observed when the Emperor intends to go on an expedition*, p. 85.

⁷³⁷ Nicetas Choniates, *Historia*, p. 336.

⁷³⁸ Külzer, 'The Byzantine road system in eastern Thrace: some remarks', p. 181.

⁷³⁹ B. Dumanov, 'Thrace in late antiquity', in J. Valeva, E. Nankov, & D. Graninger, eds., *A Companion to Ancient Thrace* (Sussex, 2015), p. 93.

⁷⁴⁰ Miller, *Itineraria romana*, p. 538.

⁷⁴¹ Külzer, 'The Byzantine road system in eastern Thrace: some remarks', p. 181-2.

⁷⁴² Theophanes, *Chronicle*, p. 175.

⁷⁴³ I. Ševčenko, 'Inscription commemorating Sisinnios, "curator" of Tzurulon (AD 813)', *Byzantion*, 35 (1965), p. 564-74.

⁷⁴⁴ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 51.

⁷⁴⁵ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 56.

⁷⁴⁶ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 191.

Alexius was able, through use of a feigned flight, to draw his enemies within range of and comprehensively defeat.⁷⁴⁷

The towns of Bulgarophygon, Arcadiopolis and Tzouroulon, therefore, all appear to have been well defended by extensive fortifications and were relatively well populated in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Choniates describes the '*fields and villages and all else that formerly came under the jurisdiction of these cities*' that were ravaged by Cuman raids after the capture of Constantinople in 1204.⁷⁴⁸ Otto of Freising also relates how the German contingent of the Second Crusade marched with '*much gladness of heart*' through the '*most fruitful regions of lower Thrace on our way to the Royal city*.'⁷⁴⁹ The status of these cities was without doubt a consequence of the fertility of this region and their respective positions astride the major landward route to the capital.

From Tzouroulon the medieval *Via Militaris* followed a different route to that followed by the original Roman road, bypassing the city of Heraclea in favour of a more direct course towards Selymbria that was likely constructed during the reign of Justinian. Whether this meant that the older route fell into abeyance is unclear. The city of Raideustos, as noted above, was the site of a major grain exchange, as well as numerous estates, such as that owned by Michael Attaleiates that was damaged by an earthquake in 1063.⁷⁵⁰ It is likely that the old route of the road, therefore, still remained in active use by local producers travelling to and fro, whilst travellers to Constantinople, and forces marching for the frontiers, took the newer, more direct route instead (Figure 81).

⁷⁴⁷ Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, p. 191-3.

⁷⁴⁸ Nicetas Choniates, *Historia*, p. 345.

⁷⁴⁹ Otto of Freising, *Gesta friderici imperatoris*, trans. C. C. Mierow, *The deeds of Frederick Barbarossa* (New York, 1953), p. 80.

⁷⁵⁰ Attaleiates, *The History*, p. 445.

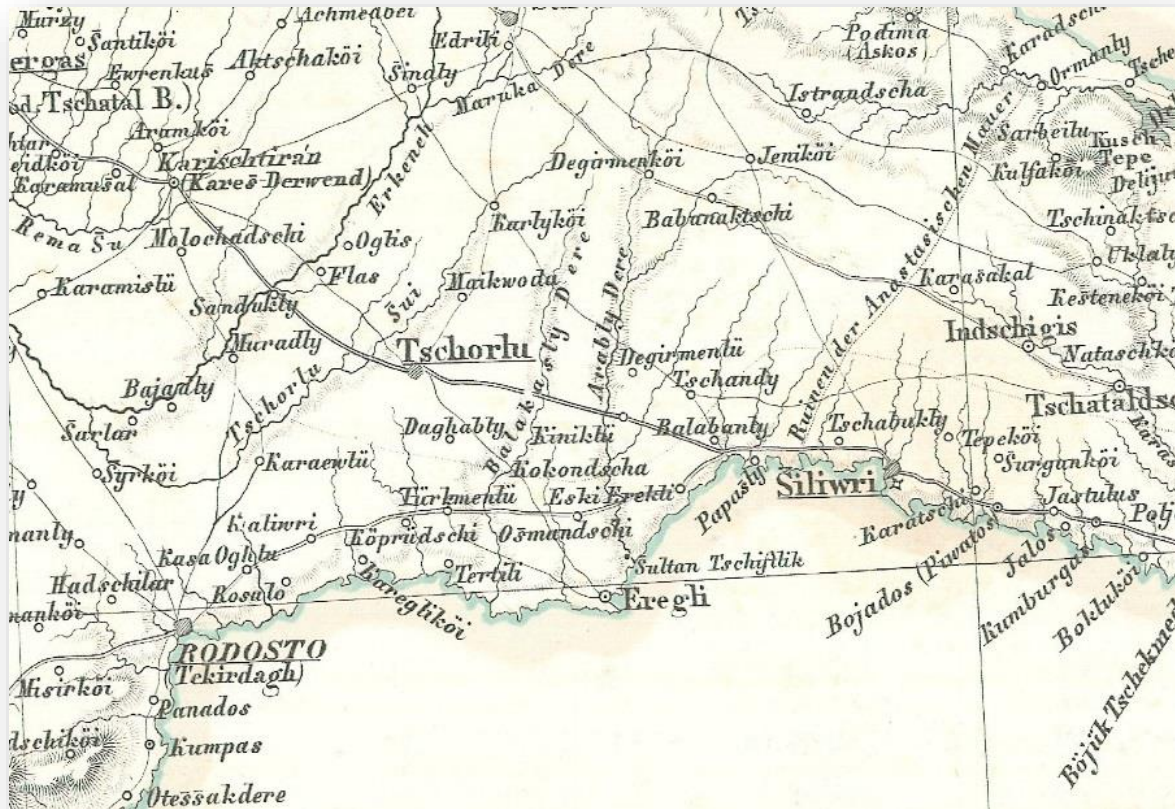


Figure 81: The Ottoman road between Çorlu and Silivri, which bypasses Ereğli, ancient Heraclea. From Kiepert, *General-Karte von der europäischen Türkei: nach allen vorhandenen Originalkarten und itinerarischen Hilfsmitteln*.

Selymbria itself was an important town in its own right. Its position along the coast, and astride the main road leading to the capital, made it an ideal staging post for Byzantine armies. It was from here, for instance, that Alexius Comnenus, at the head of an imperial army, observed the arrival of Nicephorus Byrennios' rebels in 1077.⁷⁵¹ At some point between 1166 and 1169 Manuel Comnenus raised the local see to metropolitan status, and restored a pre-existing church within the city, whilst the city also continued to receive repairs to its defences till the beginning of the thirteenth century.⁷⁵² Additionally the Anastasian, or Long, Wall met the coast just to the west of Selymbria.⁷⁵³ Little remains of these fortifications in this region today, but vast sections of it were visible to earlier travellers. Ogier de Busbecq noted, in the mid-sixteenth century, 'traces of an ancient ditch and rampart which are said to have been constructed by the later Greek emperors from the Sea of Marmara to the Danube, in

⁷⁵¹ Attaleiates, *The History*, p. 457.

⁷⁵² P. Magdalino, 'Byzantine churches of Selymbria', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 32 (1978), p. 312.

⁷⁵³ The course of the walls, or 'Anastasischen Mauer', is indicated in the above Figure 81.

order to include their territory within a line of defence and secure the estates of the inhabitants of Constantinople from the inroads of barbarians.⁷⁵⁴

It was here also that the *Via Militaris* finally united with the *Via Egnatia*. The fork in the road was notably marked by a nearby aqueduct, likely constructed in the sixth century, which ran to the town.⁷⁵⁵ The latter road is arguably the more famous, and has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. It is curious, therefore, that the Thracian extent of the *Via Egnatia* has been comparatively somewhat neglected. Perhaps this has been the influence of its first geographer, Strabo, who only measured the length of the road as far as Cypsela, modern Ipsala, on the Maritsa River. The original road ended here as this was the boundary of the Roman state at the time of its construction (between 140-120 BC), with the lands beyond being held by the Kingdom of Pergamon.⁷⁵⁶ Evidently the rest of the road was constructed later, and at least sometime before the third century owing to its appearance in the *Itinerarium Antonini*.

There were therefore actually two routes to Constantinople across Thrace, sometimes referred to as the *strata vetus*, the older road, and a newer road, the *strata nova*.⁷⁵⁷ Jireček argues that the older road ran from Cypsela to Constantinople, travelling mostly via the Thracian hinterland, and that the settlement of Caenophrurium, the site of the murder of Emperor Aurelian in 275, existed on this route.⁷⁵⁸ Caenophrurium was possibly located near the modern town of Sinekli, some 20 kilometres inland from the Marmara coast, and Drakoulis suggests that Caenophurium therefore lay along the road that also directly connected Constantinople to Bizye (Figure 82).⁷⁵⁹ Certainly a road along the route of the *strata vetus* existed in the Ottoman period, connecting the capital with the important frontier city of Kirkilisse. August Giacomo Jochmus provided a detailed description of this road as it existed in the mid-nineteenth century, including references to remains of Roman bridges along the route.⁷⁶⁰ In the early twentieth century it was the main road connecting Constantinople with the Russian frontier, and approximately 26 feet wide.⁷⁶¹

⁷⁵⁴ Ghiselin de Busbecq, *Legationis Turcicae Epistolae quatuor*, p. 25-6.

⁷⁵⁵ Crow & Turner, 'Silivri and the Thracian hinterland of Istanbul: an historic landscape', p. 170.

⁷⁵⁶ Adams, 'Communications in southeastern Thrace in the Roman period', p. 137-8.

⁷⁵⁷ Külzer, 'The Byzantine road system in eastern Thrace: some remarks', p. 192.

⁷⁵⁸ Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 52.

⁷⁵⁹ D. Drakoulis, 'European and Asiatic Settlements of the Bosphorus Hinterland in the Early Byzantine Period', p. 238.

⁷⁶⁰ A. Jochmus, 'Notes on a Journey into the Balkan, or Mount Hæmus, in 1847', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 24 (1854).

⁷⁶¹ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Handbook of Turkey in Europe*, p. 209.

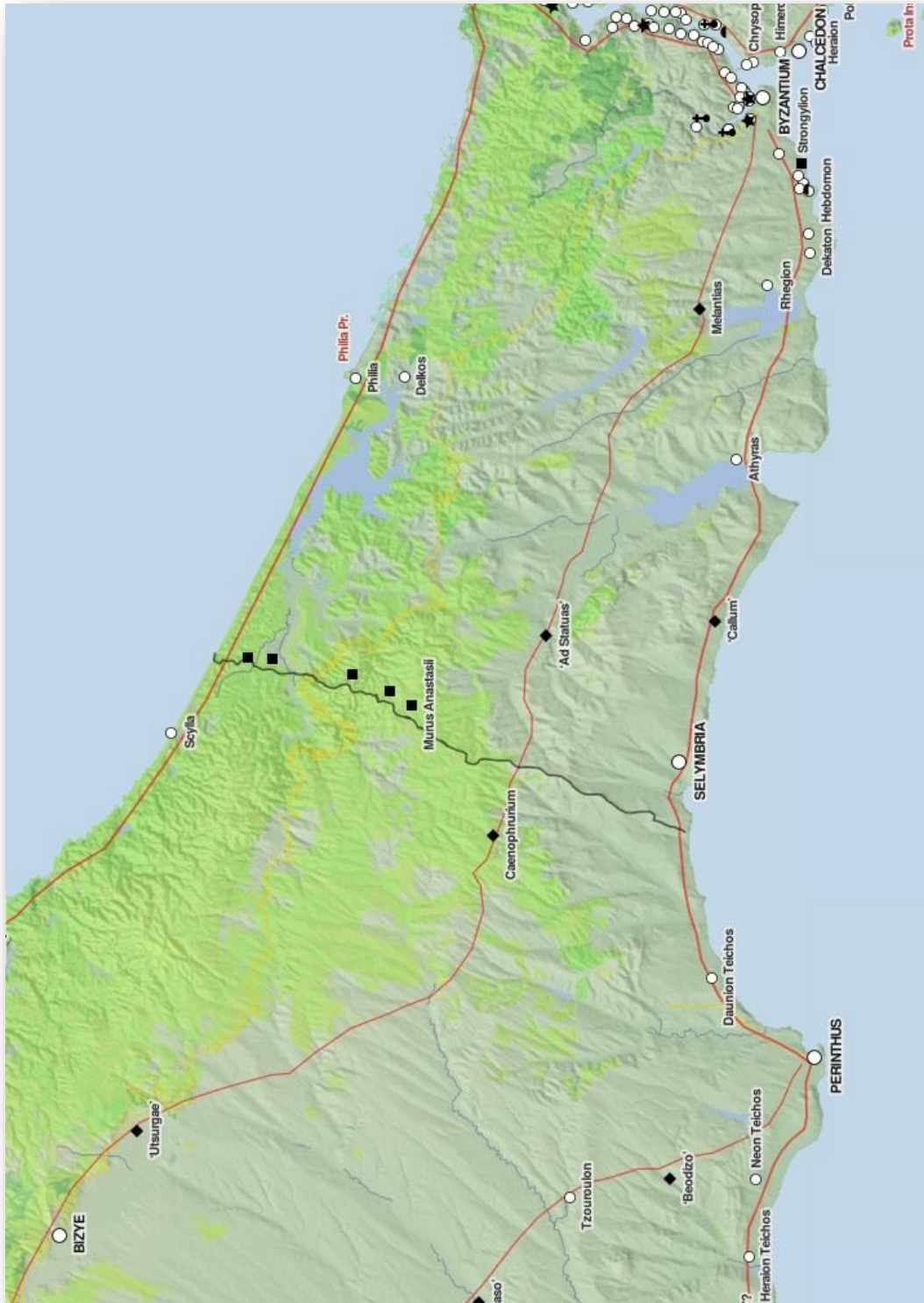


Figure 82: Caenophurium is here located on the inland road leading to Bizye, although no connection with the *Via Egnatia* is depicted. The connection between Selymbria and the *Via Militaris* is also absent. Perinthus is the original Samian name for Heraclea. Map captured from <http://pleiades.stoa.org/>

A new road, the *strata nova*, in Jireček's opinion, was constructed by Constantine at the same time as the foundation of the new capital, and ran along the coast, likely following the route of a pre-existing path that linked the Greek colonies along the shore of the Marmara.⁷⁶² It is likely that Constantine wished for a grander road to his new imperial capital, and the connection between this road and the Golden Gate, as will be seen, suggests that from the very beginning it was deliberately constructed with the intention of being associated with imperial triumphs and public veneration of the state.

Following the coast, Rhegion was an important town in the early Byzantine period, featuring imperial estates, extensive hunting grounds, and considerable defensive fortifications. It declined during the late Byzantine period, likely as a consequence of repeated devastations of Thrace from the beginning of the thirteenth century onwards, and was afterwards revived as an important caravan post under the Ottoman Empire.⁷⁶³ The road from Rhegion to Constantinople, as previously noted, was a specific focus of restoration efforts during the reign of Justinian, and Procopius describes the lavish nature with which the road was constructed in this region. Included in this was a bridge over the Myrmex, the lagoon on the shores of the Marmara known today as Küçükçekmece.⁷⁶⁴ In one of the few examples of public work projects after the reign of Justinian, this bridge is known to have been restored, or rebuilt entirely, during the reign of Basil I.⁷⁶⁵ Hans Dernschwam mentions a stone bridge that existed here in the mid-sixteenth century, and further describes the remains of the old Roman road that were then still clearly visible.⁷⁶⁶

In the late Roman and early Byzantine periods the final stretch of the *Via Militaris*, from Rhegion to Constantinople itself, was likely the best maintained section of the entire route. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, in *De Ceremoniis*, details how on triumphal entrances into the city emperors would be greeted by dignitaries (archons and tribunes) at Rhegion, or even as far away as Herakleia, and escorted to the city.⁷⁶⁷ Hebdomon, so named for lying seven Roman miles from the Milion in Constantinople, assumed a prominent part in these triumphs, and likely played the same role as the Campus Martius in Rome, in that it was the official starting point for triumphal entrances into the city (Figure 83). Returning from a successful campaign against the Paulicians, near the Euphrates, Basil I

⁷⁶² Jireček, *Die Heerstrasse von Belgrad nach Constantinopel und die Balkanpässe*, p. 53-4.

⁷⁶³ S. Turgut & E. Ceylan, *In the Wake of a Local Government Initiative: Istanbul – Küçükçekmece urban regeneration project* (Southampton, 2012), p. 6-7.

⁷⁶⁴ K. Belke, 'Communications: roads and bridges', in E. Jeffreys, J. Haldon, & R. Cormack eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford, 2008), p. 303.

⁷⁶⁵ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, p. 247.

⁷⁶⁶ Dernscham, *Ein Fugger-Kaufmann im Osmanischen Reich*, p. 37.

⁷⁶⁷ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, p. 495.

sailed from Hiereia, on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus, to Hebdomon, where he was greeted by the senate and the people of the city, before proceeding into the city.⁷⁶⁸



Figure 83: The approach to Constantinople, as depicted in the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*.

Such triumphal processions naturally entered the city via the Golden Gate, but it is not immediately clear which gate was preferred for more mundane entrances into the city. The Golden Gate itself is curiously placed, at the far southern end of the Theodosian Walls, and was connected to the Mese, the main boulevard through the city, via a southern branch. It is likely that use of the Golden Gate as an entrance into the city ceased altogether by the end of the eleventh century, for although Alexius and Manuel Comnenus celebrated triumphs in the imperial capital, it is not clear if the Golden Gate was used at all during them.⁷⁶⁹ During the reign of Isaac Angelos the Golden Gate is known to have been permanently sealed shut, and when the city was captured during the Fourth Crusade, Choniates

⁷⁶⁸ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, p. 498-9.

⁷⁶⁹ Madden, 'Triumph Re-imagined: the Golden Gate and popular memory in Byzantine and Ottoman Constantinople', p. 318-9.

describes how the Byzantine army broke through a wall that had been erected in front of the gate in order to flee the city, and that he and other evacuees later fled the same way (Figure 84).⁷⁷⁰



Figure 84: Interior view of the remains of the Golden Gate.

⁷⁷⁰ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 313 & 324.

The walls contained ten main gates in total, five public and five military, as well as numerous other small openings. A possible entrance into the city along the route of the *Via Militaris* is the Xylokerkos Postern, the first main gate to the north of the Golden Gate, and the largest of the military gates (Figure 85). This gate was ordered closed by Isaac Angelos after a prophetic vision by the Patriarch, Dositheus, which depicted Barbarossa entering the city through it.⁷⁷¹ During the Ottoman period this gate became known as the Belgrade Gate after the settlement of Serbian artisans outside of it after the conquest of Belgrade by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1521. The older, inland route of the *Via Militaris* likely instead entered the city via the more northern Melantias, or Adrianople Gate.⁷⁷² From here it is approximately 5.5 kilometres, or 3.7 Roman miles, to the Milion, the zero-mile marker for all roads that led from the imperial capital, and the end point of the *Via Militaris*.



Figure 85: The Xylokerkos Postern, or Belgrade Gate, today.

⁷⁷¹ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 222.

⁷⁷² C. Mango, 'The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 54 (2000), p. 174-5.

Which of these two roads across Thrace to the capital was subsequently the most frequently used route in the Middle Ages is a matter of debate. The road along the coast was likely the most convenient, being the most direct, but was dependent on the bridges that forded the lagoons that lay in its path. The longer, inland, route around the lagoons may instead have been preferred when these were known, or suspected, of being in poor repair.⁷⁷³ Secondary roads also linked the two, and Külzer describes a crossroads at Rhegion where a minor road ran to the north, likely connecting the *strata nova* with the *strata vetus* (Figure 86).⁷⁷⁴ During the passage of the Second Crusade the German contingent took the inland road, and the crusaders camped in the plain of the Choirbacchoi, a fertile meadow located on the northern shore of the Büyükçekmece lagoon, along the banks of the Melas River (the modern Karasu).⁷⁷⁵ A flashflood subsequently washed away a large part of the crusaders' baggage.

The barring of the gates on the southern end of the walls of Constantinople suggests that by the end of the twelfth century at least, the coastal approach to the city had declined in preference to the older, inland route that skirted the northern shores of the lagoons, the road which was taken by the German contingent of the Second Crusade. As a consequence, during this period it was likely the older road, the *strata vetus*, rather than the newer coastal road, which carried the greatest weight of traffic.

⁷⁷³ Mango, 'The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate', p. 175.

⁷⁷⁴ Külzer, 'The Byzantine road system in eastern Thrace: some remarks', p. 193.

⁷⁷⁵ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 47. See also Choniates, *Historia*, p. 37-8, and Otto of Freising, *Gesta friderici imperatoris*, p. 80-1.

11.9: The Via Militaris – Some Conclusions

This thesis has been unable to provide clear answers to some of the more pressing questions concerning the medieval *Via Militaris*, in particular in regards to the exact route it followed, and what alternative courses existed. Indeed these questions are likely unanswerable until further evidence, particularly in the form of archaeological excavations, are brought to bear. But what this thesis has been able to accomplish is highlight the unsatisfactory nature of existing depictions of the *Via Militaris*. This vitally important road ought to be intimately familiar to all historians of the medieval Balkans, but the reality is that uncertainty governs almost its entire extent. Indeed, what is surprising is that when the road is examined in detail, how little can be said with any degree of certainty of either its route or condition in the medieval period. This is not a new claim, indeed it is a charge that has also been levelled against the far more studied *Via Egnatia*.⁷⁷⁶ Nevertheless, whilst this topic had been approached in the expectation that the level of available resources would be low, the sheer paucity of material available to the researcher of the medieval *Via Militaris* still came as a stunning revelation.

The most startling discovery is the near universal lack of agreement within existing depictions of the route of the *Via Militaris*. The assumptions that are made over its course are revealed through the diversity in the maps that seek to plot its path through space, few of which are alike, and most of which seek safety in scales so large as to render local detail meaningless. The greatest discrepancies exist in depictions of its extent between Philippopolis and Adrianople, but there is a general lack of agreement over its route along other sections as well. *The Atlas of the Crusades*, for instance, is unique in that it shows the route followed by Barbarossa on the Third Crusade as continuing to follow the Danube seemingly as far as modern Vidin (although it is labelled as Branits), before then travelling south-west to Naissus (Figure 87). Many depictions of the road show it travelling south from Serdica, following the Iskar River, rather than progressing east across the Sofia plain. There is likewise a lack of agreement over the exact route of the road through the Gates of Trajan, which vary from diversions through the Momina Klissura, to the curious detour depicted by Miller, whilst furthermore in many sources, such as the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, the Succi Pass is not depicted at

⁷⁷⁶ M. Popović, 'Moving through Medieval Macedonia; late modern cartography, archive material, and hydrographic data used for the regressive modelling of transportation networks', *Studia Ceranea*, 2 (2012), p. 165.

all, with the scale employed simply being too large for such a narrow geographical feature (Figure 88).



Figure 87: A depiction of the itinerary of Frederick Barbarossa during the Third Crusade. Branits here is located much further to the west, near modern Vidin. From J. Riley-Smith ed., *The Atlas of the Crusades* (New York, 1990), p. 63.

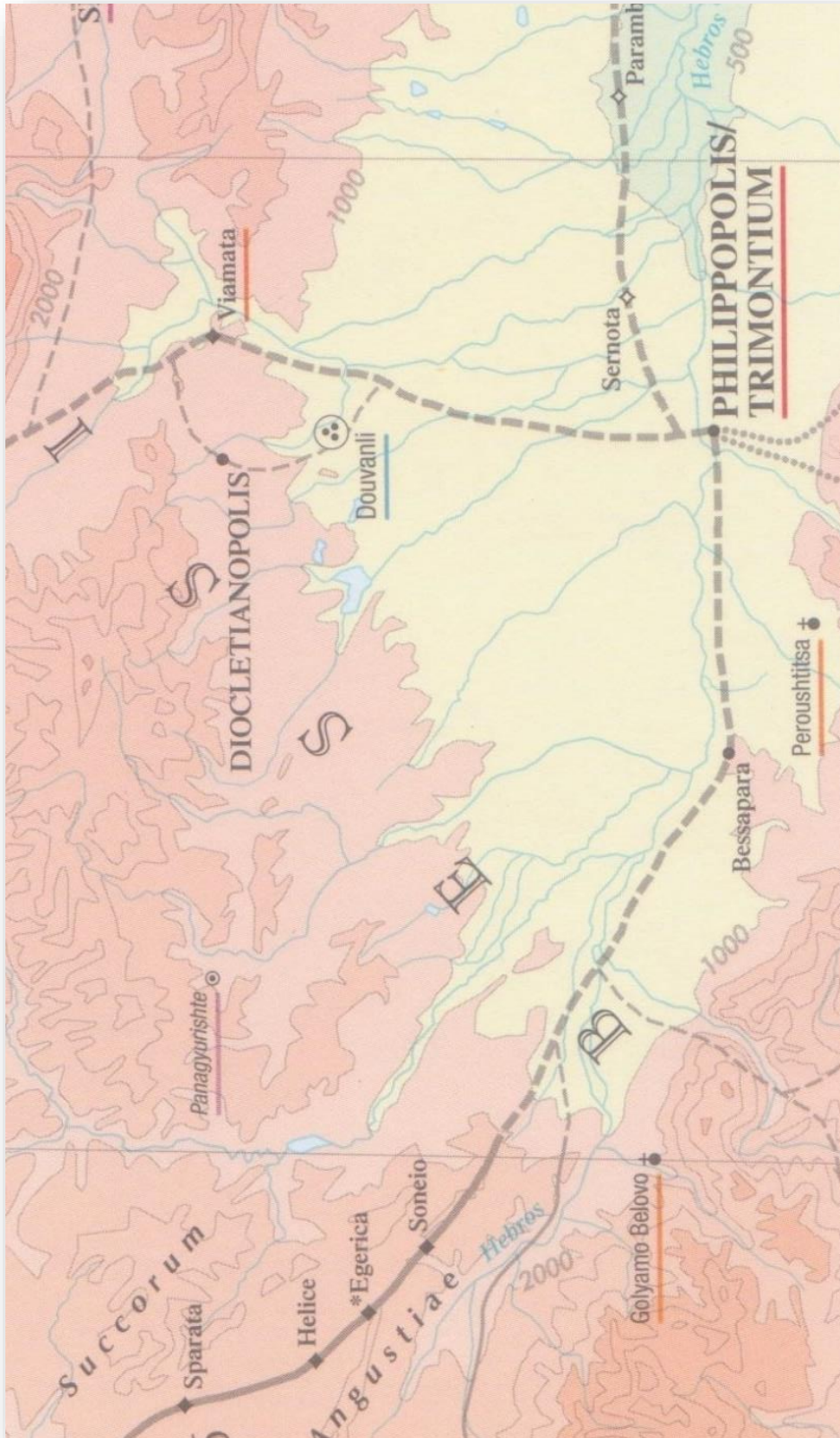


Figure 88: The valley of the Succi Pass is not represented at all in this depiction, as the topographical scale simply does not allow it. From the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*.

Such deviations are not surprising, many Roman roads crisscrossed the Balkan Peninsula, not just major highways but also smaller secondary roads. If the main road became too dilapidated or unsafe to use in the Middle Ages, it stands to reason that alternate routes would be utilised, but given the ambiguity within the sources it is often almost impossible to determine which was used at any one point in time. Existing depictions of the medieval *Via Militaris*, therefore, fail to represent the fact that in this period it was almost certainly not one single road, but rather a network of roads. A failure to recognise this has led to the multitude of variations which exist between depictions of the route today.

Archaeological remains of road stations, therefore, whilst convenient signposts, do not necessarily demarcate the route of the medieval road, and simply drawing lines between them is not an adequate solution. Instead, geographical considerations must also be utilised. So whilst stations such as Scretisca, on the outskirts of Serdica, almost certainly lay across the route of the medieval *Via Militaris*, if only because there are few other routes the road feasibly could have followed in this region, it is not necessarily the case that the medieval road followed the route of Roman road stations along the eastern bank of the Morava River for instance, or along the coast of the Sea of Marmara on the approach to Constantinople. Here the road possibly utilised alternate routes, of which our knowledge is comparatively lacking. Further archaeological surveys are therefore required, such as those undertaken at Karasura and Castra Rubra which suggest that whilst these sites may have been unrecognisable compared to the *mansio* of the Roman period, ceramic remains indicate the existence of medieval settlement, and they therefore represent locations where medieval travellers might find rest and supplies.

It might reasonably be asked how important these deviations really are, or indeed if any 'correct' depiction of the complete route is even possible. The latter is debatable, and given the manifold number of alternate routes, usage of which likely varied dependent on weather and relative conditions, no single true depiction of the route exists. However the former postulation raises the important question of road construction and repair under the Byzantine Empire, and to what extent was it able to engage in large scale practices of either, for to depict the road between Philippopolis and Adrianople as travelling south of the Maritsa is to suggest that the Byzantines were capable of constructing entirely new roads to suit their needs.

Evidence of such activity beyond the sixth century is almost entirely lacking, and unless considerable evidence pertaining to the contrary is uncovered, it must be assumed that original Roman road beds were utilised over the construction of entirely new road surfaces. As no known Roman road ran to the south of the Maritsa River, a Byzantine road here could only have been the result of construction activity on a scale far larger than the scanty evidence of administrative apparatus would suggest was

possible. However, neither should it be assumed that no road maintenance occurred at all, even if little evidence survives to indicate its existence. Although the construction of extensive new roads was almost certainly beyond the means of the medieval Byzantine state, the rehabilitation of existing routes would likely have formed an important compliment to the reabsorption of territory considered to form part of the wider Byzantine *Ecumene*, such as during and after Basil II's conquest of the Balkans. Here the construction and repair of highways was potentially prioritised, as it was via these major routes that Byzantine authority was enforced.

Yet the imposition of Byzantine authority over this region was not without contest. This is most spectacularly demonstrated by the 'Manichean' community in Philippopolis, which proved impressively capable of withstanding attempts by imperial authorities to stamp it out. Instead the 'Manichean' community appears to have not only remained a prominent presence in the city until at least the Early Modern era, but spread to further cities along the route of the *Via Militaris*, such as Serdica and Naissus. The persistence of such a divisive element located no more than a few weeks march from the imperial capital appears difficult to countenance, but clearly the geographical distance which separated Philippopolis from the capital played a strong role in protecting this community from more direct persecution, and fermented the development of a distinct local identity far different from that in 'Orthodox' Constantinople. If Philippopolis was capable of hosting such a community, then what must have been the case in far more isolated cities, such as Serdica and Naissus? Currently available literary and archaeological sources are little help in answering such questions directly, but perhaps greater scrutiny of the transport routes that linked these cities may provide more insight.

The greatest volume of literary sources concerning such routes occurs during the crusading period, yet even here issues arise. For instance the participants of the First Crusade appear to have experienced no particular hardships travelling from the Danube to Naissus, yet for Barbarossa on the Third Crusade this was a slow and arduous journey. Attempting to discern why is no easy task; as a consequence of the heavy pilgrim traffic of the previous century had the road degenerated to the point where it was rendered largely impassable, or had their guides genuinely attempted to waylay and mislead the crusaders by taking them along a different road? Perhaps it was simply a case that poor recent weather had turned the track into a muddy quagmire, as had been the case for Henry the Lion, whilst previous crusaders had benefitted from far more benign conditions.

This uncertainty provides further evidence that the *Via Militaris* of the third century was not the same road of the eleventh and twelfth, and measuring the variations between the two over time and space introduces a number of complications. In regions such as along the Morava River, where there is a lack of conclusive evidence, attempting to determine both the route and quality of the road at any one

point in time is a difficult proposition indeed owing to the alternate routes available. Even on seemingly more straightforward stretches of the route, such as the approaches to both Philippopolis and Constantinople, it is difficult to ascertain where, exactly, the road lay. Multiple potential routes here are available, and the sources themselves rarely give any conclusive indication of which was being utilised at any one point in time (Figure 89).

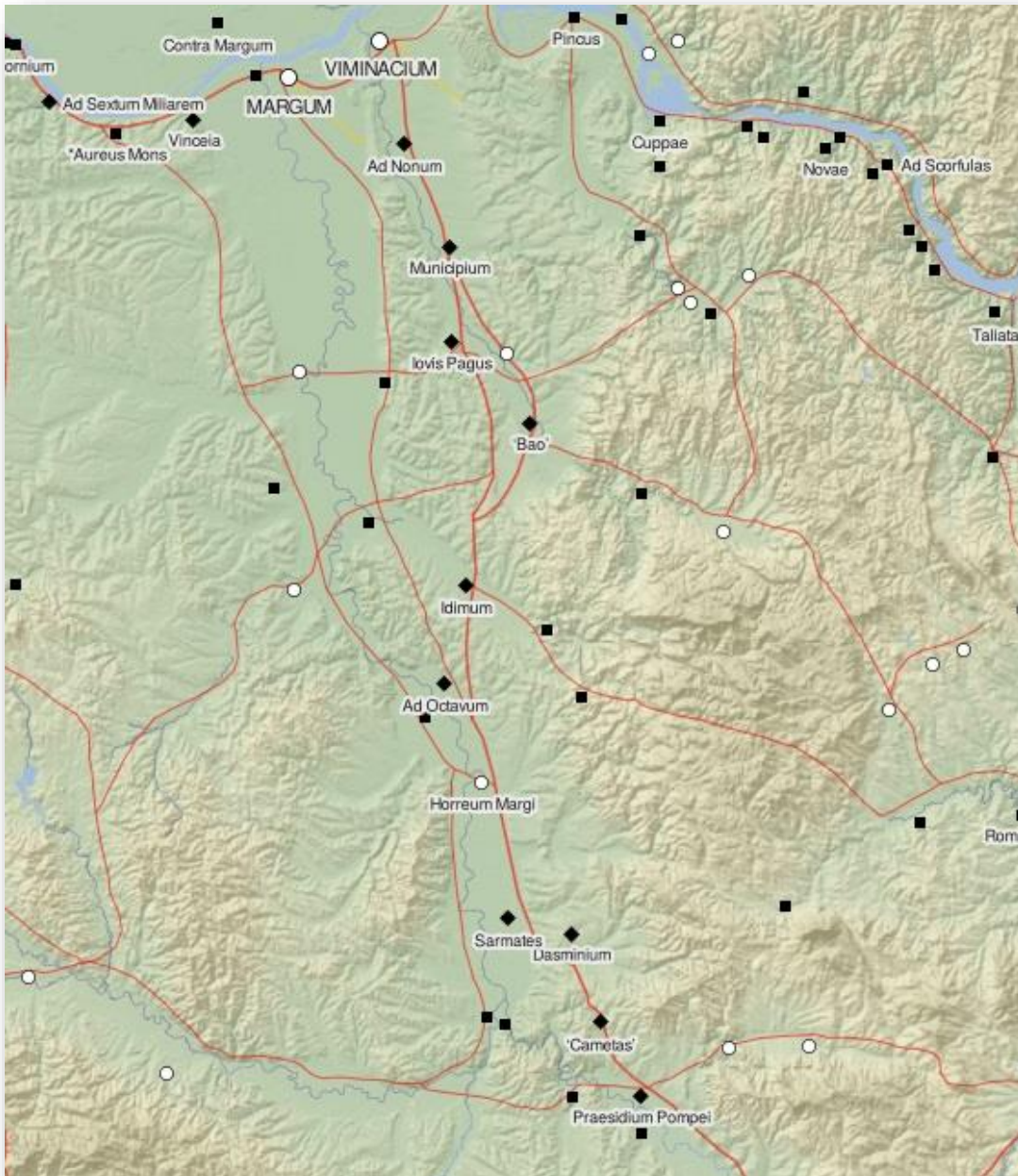


Figure 89: The Roman road network of the Morava Valley as depicted by pleiades.stoa.org. Whilst the main highway followed the river's east bank, as its surface deteriorated in the Middle Ages any or even all of these roads may have been utilised as alternatives.

Nevertheless, this thesis is able to offer some provisional answers to some of the more pressing issues confronting studies of the medieval *Via Militaris*. The most obvious conclusion is that the *Via Militaris* was not uniform in either its route or composition over time. It followed different routes that reflected the changing demography of the lands through which it ran, and its surface likewise changed over time in accordance with the requirements and administrative capabilities of those who used and maintained it. Roads are not natural phenomena, and in particular roads in mountainous areas, where they are subjected to extremes of temperature, flash floods, landslides or erosion, can be rendered impassable, or simply disappear, in relatively short periods of time. Moreover, roads are also highly mutable, and can change in both location and composition according to the needs of contemporary society.

In this respect the *Via Militaris* of the Middle Ages was highly unlike that which had existed in the late Roman period, as the Byzantine state had little need for a road capable of accommodating large numbers of marching troops and heavy oxen-borne wagons in all weather conditions and every season of the year. This can easily be inferred from the time it took armies to travel along this route. To travel between Belgrade and Constantinople on the Roman road would have taken approximately 35-40 days, and Obolensky argues small parties or couriers could have managed it in half this time.⁷⁷⁷ Yet it took the German contingent of the Third Crusade approximately 50 days to march from Branichevo to Philippopolis. Clearly the road which these crusaders followed was a very different one to that taken by travellers in earlier periods.

The medieval *Via Militaris* was, therefore, a demonstrably different road from that which had existed in the late Roman period, and its quality undoubtedly varied greatly across its length in accordance with the ability of the Byzantine Empire to maintain its surface. The capacity of the Byzantine state to actually undertake necessary repair work, however, is difficult to discern. So little evidence has emerged of the Balkans in the seventh and into the eighth centuries that it can only be concluded that in this period chaos must have reigned. We are unaware if even the cities themselves survived, so the administrative structures that they sustained must surely have collapsed, indeed were likely the first to disintegrate as organised society broke down. The cities of Serdica and Naissus during this period were largely isolated, and although some remnants of their original populations may have remained, between the Danube and Serdica it is possible that the *Via Militaris* simply ceased to function at all. Even the fate of Philippopolis is uncertain, although its superb defensive location, the agricultural richness of the region, and the convenience afforded it by the Maritsa River, likely spared it from the worst, and the road here possibly fared somewhat better.

⁷⁷⁷ Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, p. 18.

Those regions closest to the capital Constantinople, with larger rural populations and a Mediterranean style climate, must surely have weathered the storm far better than those further afield, and in particular those regions that were integrated into the agricultural matrix that supplied the teeming masses of the capital likely retained some degree of local transport functionality. Therefore, only with the reconquest of the Balkans by Basil II, and the introduction of formal military administration over this region, does the potential for the rehabilitation of the road beyond the Gates of Trajan, and the possibility of the route accommodating the passage of the vast contingents of the first three crusades, emerge. Although the First Bulgarian Empire may have dedicated some efforts towards the preservation of this road, it was the large-scale restoration of this route under Byzantine auspices which turned the idea of mass armed pilgrimages to the Holy Land, accompanied by both two and four-wheeled wagons, into a practical reality.

During the subsequent passage of crusading forces across the Balkans there can be discerned at least three notably different sections of the route. The first being that which ran from the Danube River to Naissus, the second ran along the Nishava River from Naissus to Serdica, and finally the third section progressed through the Maritsa Valley, from Philippopolis to Adrianople, and then onto the capital itself. Each of these sections appear to have been materially different from the others, and it can be assumed that climate, terrain, and proximity to major urban centres, and therefore sources of labour, were defining factors.

The most distant section of the road, between the Danube and Naissus, was by far the worst maintained of the entire route. Overgrown and unmaintained, the route along the Morava River through the formidable 'Bulgarian Forest', presented innumerable challenges for an army to overcome, not the least being the constant threat of starvation and brigandage. If William of Tyre's claim that the empire forbade settlement in this region is to be believed, with the associated absence of a native workforce to carry out necessary repairs, or simply keep the route open through constant local use, then these deleterious conditions are exactly what could be expected of a road in this region. The confusion that surrounds the passage of the Third Crusade through the Morava Valley indicates that if alternate routes existed here they were probably so poor themselves that they offered no real improvement over the main road, no matter how badly maintained it might be.

The section along the Nishava River, between Naissus and Serdica, was also in poor condition, although unlike along the Morava River this was less the consequence of deliberate Byzantine policy than simply a reflection of the naturally low population density along this section of the route, one which Byzantium sought to alleviate through forced resettlements. Similar to the thick 'Bulgarian Forest' along the Morava River, the narrow valleys along this section of the route exposed parties to

the constant threat of ambush, as the road was easily blocked and raids could be launched down the slopes on either side of the road. Furthermore, owing to heavy seasonal rains and the flash floods common to this region, where the road negotiated narrow river valleys the formation of potholes, erosion channels, or even the loss of whole sections of road through washouts, would have formed a considerable hindrance, a reality reflected by the repeated references within crusading sources to the 'hard' or 'difficult' nature of the road here.

On more open, densely populated, sections of the route, in particular along the Maritsa River and through Thrace, such hindrances were likely far less frequent, and this is reflected again in the crusading sources which have almost nothing to say of the quality of the road between Philippopolis and the capital. This would suggest that its surface here was, for the most part, relatively good, and certainly presented no great hindrance to the passage of large numbers of marching men with their attendant pack animals and baggage. Here, as opposed to more distant sections of the route, existed relatively large urban populations that could be pressed through *corvée* to maintain local road networks. Opportunities for pursuing alternate routes were also more likely in these regions owing to a higher general density of traffic. The *strata vetus* and *strata nova* is one such example where travellers could opt for an alternate route if a particular section of the road proved to be ill-maintained, or the bridge over the Myrmex in a poor state of repair.

What little road construction that did occur during this period was almost certainly the consequence of ad hoc appropriation of local resources by regional governors who were acting under direct instruction from administrative bodies located in Constantinople. The *Via Militaris* was therefore surely only rendered consistently useable when, in anticipation of a major campaign, explicit orders were given by the state to ensure that local roads were maintained in a good state of repair. The construction activity that did occur was almost certainly low level maintenance work aimed at rendering the surface usable in the most expedient manner possible, and involved the exploitation of local populations by *corvée*, or perhaps the employment of itinerant workers. The filling in of pot holes was likely a priority, and as Lopez notes, much of this work was applied directly to the formidable bed of the original Roman road, with its former paved surface being instead replaced by a matrix of rubble and spoila. Indeed the *pavimentum* of the original road, after being broken up and reused, would have provided an important source of material for this work.

Another potentially valuable source of building material were the abandoned stations and watchtowers, refortified by Justinian, which dotted the route. Many of these were likely demolished, and reused as a ready source of construction material. Certainly they were utilised by Ottoman road builders for this purpose, who demolished the 'Trajan Gate' in order to use the material to resurface

the road through the Succi Pass. This stone would have been broken down into fragments and laid into the surface, fixed into place by gravel and mud. The impact of differing weather conditions on a road of this type would have been pronounced, and so whilst the solidly paved road of the Roman period was usable in all but the worst of conditions, even brief summer thunderstorms likely turned much of the medieval *Via Militaris* into a muddy quagmire.

But even then, the ability of the Byzantine state to accomplish even such modest maintenance feats is questionable, and other than those sections close to major population settlements, such as in Thrace or along the Maritsa River, much of the road must have remained relatively untended, and certainly between the Danube and Serdica little work would have been possible, owing to the low population densities along this section. Progress along the road, therefore, would have been slowed by both poor weather and the constant need to pick a safe route through obstructions such as potholes, gullies and roadside erosion. Even though the medieval road would have largely utilised the foundations of the pre-existing Roman road, the extent of its operable surface area, in particular for wheeled vehicles, would have been largely reduced as Byzantium surely lacked the means to maintain such a broad surface area. So whilst the archaeological evidence, and surviving stretches of the Ottoman road today, indicate that the Roman *Via Militaris* maintained a consistent width of near eight metres, the width of the Byzantine road must instead have been highly variable.

Typically the *Via Militaris* would have been narrower and more uneven from the Danube to Serdica, and then wider and more consistently even from then on. This is a gross generalisation of course, and poor stretches of the road almost certainly existed in the Maritsa Valley and Thrace, and some earlier sections of the road may have been maintained in a quite good state, particularly around the city of Naissus. Unquestionably the quality of the road would have directly reflected the strength and stability of the Byzantine state as a whole. When, during the reigns of John and Manuel Comnenus, Serdica hosted a mustering ground, or *aplekta*, local roads were likely kept in a good state of repair.⁷⁷⁸ Yet by the time of the passage of the Third Crusade during the reign of Isaac Angelos, the town was considered as being intolerably poor, and local road surfaces would subsequently have undoubtedly reflected this.

The *Via Militaris*, as it existed in the Roman period, would appear to have been uniformly eight metres wide, and occasionally even wider than this, reflecting its status as the premier overland route linking the new capital with Northern Italy and Central Europe. The section of the road, dated to the fourth century, unearthed near Dimitrovgrad is of these dimensions, as are several other remains noted by late nineteenth and early twentieth century archaeologists such as Pavel Detev (Figure 90). Surviving

⁷⁷⁸ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 151.

sections of road surface today, which are almost certainly of Ottoman origin, are also of this uniform width, and furthermore often sit upon impressively broad embankments when negotiating narrow valleys, suggesting that in these environments at least they may be following the exact course of the earlier Roman road. The lack of a centralised system of maintenance during the Byzantine period, however, renders the idea that the *Via Militaris* could have been sustained at a width of eight metres across its extent difficult to believe. If the necessary administrative apparatus pertaining to road repair did exist, surely some evidence of their activity would have survived.

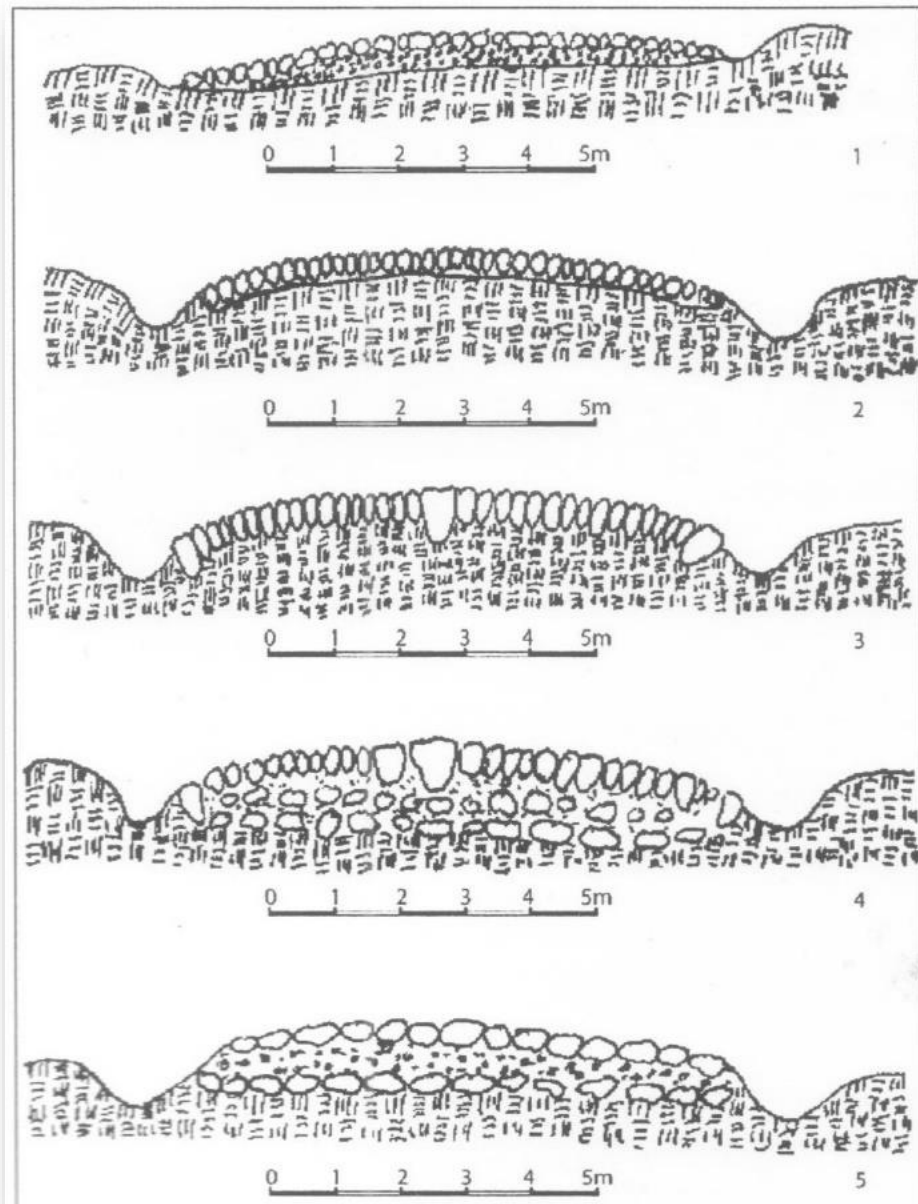


Figure 90: Cross sections of the Roman *Via Militaris* between the stations Burdenis and Arzus as depicted by Pavel Detev, reproduced in Madzharov, *Roman Roads in Bulgaria*, p. 33.

How wide, then, was the *Via Militaris* utilised by the participants of the Third Crusade? Since it was still usable by vehicles, it likely conformed to the minimum width necessary for two wagons to pass each other, i.e. 18 feet or approximately 5.5 metres. This width is enough for five men, or two horses, to march abreast. At times the road may have been narrower than this, reducing vehicle traffic to single file, and at times perhaps wider. But on average this is a reasonable figure, and there would have been little to no reason for the Byzantine state to maintain a road surface wider than this, and given its resources it almost certainly lacked the means to do so. In any case, a width of 5.5 metres is

wider than that measured along many other major routes, such as the *Via Egnatia* which was closer to three metres wide during this period, and stands testament to the strategic importance of the road, as well as the extraordinarily broad foundations of the Roman road upon which it lay.

That the sources provide clear evidence that the *Via Militaris* was definitely able to accommodate wheeled vehicles across its entire extent is also the result of the fact that it never reached the sorts of gradients, like along the *Via Egnatia*, which would have rendered them impractical, if not unusable. When considering the Balkans, attention is immediately drawn to the mountain ranges of the region. Even the name itself, *Balkan*, refers to them.⁷⁷⁹ Yet whilst the route of the *Via Militaris* was shaped by the mountainous terrain it negotiated, this thesis has definitely shown that it was not a mountain road. It was, if anything, a hill road. This may seem a small detail, but it had enormous ramifications for the importance of this route during the crusading period in particular.

Owing to the convenience of the topography along its route, only the descent through the Succi Pass, which reaches gradients of 8% but averages closer to 5%, would have represented a significant obstacle to vehicles, and even this pales in comparison to those encountered on the far more precipitous *Via Egnatia*, which frequently reached gradients which were at least twice as steep. Early twentieth century studies show that inclines of up to 7% are tolerable for horse-drawn wagons, but beyond these, and certainly above 11%, they become very difficult to negotiate, not just uphill but downhill as well. Gradients greater than this become very demanding for even small two-wheeled wagons, and therefore likely necessitated their unloading and the usage of pack animals.⁷⁸⁰ In this context it can be seen how favourable the route of the *Via Militaris* was in terms of the landscape it encompassed, and how, by travelling largely east to west through river valleys, the *Via Militaris* avoided a difficult transit through far more precipitous mountain ranges.⁷⁸¹ It is for this reason that it is dangerous to generalise too broadly about the mountains, and mountainous terrain, of the Balkans, and the difficulties involved in negotiating them.⁷⁸²

Nevertheless, Odo of Deuil's remarks that the wagons employed during the Second Crusade offered more '*hope than usefulness*', and that in trying to avoid broken down carts, or long traffic jams, they '*ran into more serious hindrances*' suggests that whilst the *Via Militaris* could indeed accommodate wheeled vehicles, sections of poorly maintained road surface still often made them impractical and

⁷⁷⁹ The word can be roughly translated from the Turkish as '*a chain of wooded mountains*'.

⁷⁸⁰ Harger & Bonney, *Handbook for highway engineers*, p. 10-1. Although early twentieth century team hauled wagons were capable of conveying far larger loads than their medieval antecedents, these figures are still largely applicable.

⁷⁸¹ E. C. Semple, *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region: its relation to Ancient History* (Constable, 1932), p. 218.

⁷⁸² Hordell & Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, p. 80-2.

led to extensive traffic jams, whilst attempting to make use of detours or alternate routes only created further problems. Many of these alternate routes were likely much narrower than the main highway, which would have made their use highly problematical for forces which contained large numbers of wheeled vehicles, and the delays these would have caused would have proven exceptionally tiresome. But the utility wagons provided must have outweighed the negatives, for the convenience they offered surely played an important role in the decision of the leaders of the Second Crusade, as well as Barbarossa during the Third, to take this route. That Barbarossa abandoned the army's wagons before crossing over to Asia Minor suggests that there, unlike in the Balkans, the roads were entirely unsuited to their use, as Barbarossa likely well knew himself from previous experience.⁷⁸³

Finally, it can also be deduced from the sources that from the mid-eleventh century onwards the Byzantines adopted a deliberate policy of abandoning the land behind the middle Danubian frontier in order to create a 'no man's land' that posed a severe logistical hindrance to the movement of large forces. Whilst Basil II's conquest of Bulgaria appears as a deliberately offensive act, it began, and can actually be considered in its entirety, on a purely defensive basis. The goal was the achievement of defensive potential, of pushing the borders of the empire further back to increase the size of the defensive zones that protected the heartland of the empire, which in this instance were the vital production centres of the Maritsa Valley and Thracian hinterland.⁷⁸⁴

Whilst the subsequent abandonment of the middle Danube predated the crusading period, having been implemented in the mid-eleventh century, its advantages proved beneficial here as well, as the Byzantines were naturally suspicious of the motives of the large crusader forces that traversed its territory during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. Sustained logistical pressure was one of the means whereby the loyalty of these groups could be assured, in that by reducing them to a state of dependency both Alexius and Manuel Comnenus were able to extract oaths from crusade leaders that guaranteed the behaviour of crusading forces on Byzantine territory, as well as recognition of their rights to reconquered territory in Asia Minor.

This approach, which had been successfully applied by both Alexius and Manuel Comnenus during the First and Second Crusades, imploded spectacularly during the passage of the Third Crusade. Rather than reduce Barbarossa to a state of compliance, Isaac Angelos merely provoked Barbarossa into a position of outright hostility, occupying both Philippopolis and Adrianople, and raiding throughout Thrace, until Isaac capitulated and agreed to the immediate transportation of the crusader host to Asia Minor.

⁷⁸³ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 96.

⁷⁸⁴ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 40-1.

Why Isaac had not previously acquiesced to Barbarossa's demand for transport across the straits was likely a consequence of the mutual suspicion held by each party of the others motives. The crusaders believed Byzantium was in league with Saladin against them, and the failure to provide the promised markets, as well as the constant ambushes along the route, only appeared to confirm their suspicions. Isaac, meanwhile, influenced by the bitter anti-Western preaching of the Patriarch Dositheus, believed Barbarossa wished for nothing more than to place himself, or his son, upon the imperial throne. Brand argues that, fresh after a Norman invasion of the empire, the harried emperor would have found it inconceivable that Barbarossa harboured any designs other than that of overthrowing the Byzantine Empire, and was likely conspiring with both the Serbs and Bulgarians to this end.⁷⁸⁵

Added to the perceived need to protect the capital from any potential attack was a desire to ensure that before Barbarossa was transported to the Asian shore he could be bound through the same oaths, in regards to conquered territory, that previous crusader leaders had been pressed to accept. It is reported within crusader sources that Isaac had demanded '*half the land which our army conquered from the Saracens to be assigned to him*' before he would transport the host to Asia Minor.⁷⁸⁶ Whilst the Germans were offended by the tone of the missives they received from the Byzantine Emperor, Harris notes that the demands contained within them were much in line with those made during previous crusades.⁷⁸⁷ Although the threat the crusaders posed to Byzantium is often emphasised, and certainly Isaac himself appears to have believed that they harboured designs upon the capital itself, it should be noted that they also represented a precious opportunity. For Isaac, the passage of the crusaders offered the possibility of not only making significant territorial gains in Asia Minor, but of restoring his own beleaguered authority in the capital.

The logistical pressures faced by Barbarossa's force were immense, and even in optimal conditions the difficulties of supplying such a horde would have been severe. In hostile territory that had been ravaged by war for a number of years, and with winter rapidly closing, Barbarossa's position was a precarious one. Isaac's intent had seemingly been to increase the logistical pressures faced by the crusaders through both military and diplomatic means. By first offering free passage, then withdrawing it and seizing the German ambassadors, he aimed to throw the crusaders into confusion, during which their advance would be delayed as they sought to find a solution to the impasse. Meanwhile Byzantine forces would harry the crusaders, denying them access to provisions and fodder. The Byzantines, who through the work of their envoys would have been well informed of the size of the approaching army, were well aware of the extraordinary logistical pressures Barbarossa's force

⁷⁸⁵ Brand, *Byzantium confronts the West*, p. 176.

⁷⁸⁶ Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, p. 150-1.

⁷⁸⁷ J. Harris, *Byzantium and the Crusades* (London, 2003), p. 133-4.

would have faced, and each day of potential delay in its passage of the Balkans would have seen these pressures only mount further.

These methods were certainly partly directed towards protecting local producers from the depredations of hungry crusaders, but more importantly they would have sought to increase pressure on the crusader leadership in order to make it more malleable to Byzantine diplomacy. At the heart of this approach therefore is the issue of logistics and logistical planning. Isaac's strategy towards the crusaders belies easy explanation, particularly if we do not take at face value Choniates' claim that he had simply taken all leave of his senses. Choniates artfully illustrates how Isaac's paranoia, fuelled by the rabid anti-Western sentiment of his close ally, the Patriarch Dositheus, reached a fever pitch in the winter of 1189/0, and this directly led to the bizarrely erratic decisions he made during this period.⁷⁸⁸ Yet beneath this possibly lay a more subtle intent, one that sought to throw the crusaders advance into confusion, and use the logistical pressures this delay would create against it at the negotiating table.

In order to appreciate Isaac's otherwise seemingly nonsensical attitude during this critical period, and the sorts of pressures Barbarossa's force was subjected to, it is therefore essential to define the underlying logistical context. The movement of large armies, in particular crusader armies, were feats of extraordinary logistical management, yet whilst medieval logistics is a field that currently receives relatively more attention than previously has been the case, it is still extremely poorly defined in regards to the medieval Balkans. In particular it is necessary to outline the sorts of demands that the mechanics of moving and supplying armies over long distances can create. For to fail to appreciate these particular demands can result in the wrong conclusions being drawn. As the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, bemoaned, a lack of understanding of basic logistics can lead to a critical popular opinion that '*measured the movements of an army by the capacity of locomotion of an individual*', or, as the Union general Don Carlos Buell remarked, '*the appliances that are necessary to make them successful cannot move over dirt roads in the winter with quite as much facility as a man takes the cars at Washington and goes to Baltimore.*'⁷⁸⁹ Without understanding the logistical mechanics that governed the passage of the Third Crusade across the Balkans, we are unable to effectively critique Byzantine responses to it.

⁷⁸⁸ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 222.

⁷⁸⁹ H. Hattaway & A. Jones, *How the North won: a military history of the Civil War* (Urbana, 1983), p. 63.

Chapter 12: Case Study - The role of the *Via Militaris* in the passage of the Third Crusade

The route of the *Via Militaris*, even if it can only currently be traced imperfectly, still represents a powerful tool with which to analyse the mechanics of army movement across the Central Balkans, and therefore determine the ability of not only people to move along it during the Middle Ages, but also of the Byzantine Empire to project its power and authority over this space, and in particular how it was able to use logistical pressure as a means with which to manage the passage of vast forces whose motives were, in Byzantine eyes at least, questionable. The passage of the German contingent of the Third Crusade across the Balkan Peninsula, led by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, offers a unique opportunity to explore the movement of an army across the *Via Militaris* in practice, to analyse the condition of this road as it existed in the late twelfth century, and the sorts of difficulties movement across it imposed.

The Third Crusade has specifically been chosen for this case study as we are relatively well informed of the progress of this force through numerous contemporary sources, which affords the possibility of not only calculating its average rate of march, but of modelling the passage of this force through space. Such a model could subsequently provide valuable insights into the logistical demands such an expedition encompassed, and furthermore offer a context within which Emperor Isaac Angelos' seemingly bizarre attitude towards the crusaders might be effectively critiqued.

Before the crusaders' departure Barbarossa sought, and received, assurances from Byzantine envoys that markets would be made available from which provisions could be bought. The careful precautions subsequently undertaken by Barbarossa indicate that he took the Byzantine envoys' promises of market services at face value, and intended for his force to resupply itself through the purchase of provisions. Prospective crusaders were required to bring wealth necessary to sustain themselves for one, or two, years on campaign, whilst maintenance of discipline on the march was a key priority for Barbarossa. Before the crusade departed Regensburg Barbarossa introduced strict disciplinary protocols, upheld by appointed judges, who were empowered to order the execution of those who were found guilty of breaching market regulations.⁷⁹⁰

In reality, however, Barbarossa's hopes of purchasing required provisions were to prove in vain. The Byzantines did not provide the promised markets, and it is likely they lacked the means to even do so given the turbulent political climate prevalent in the Balkan Peninsula prior to the crusaders' arrival.

⁷⁹⁰ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 57.

Unlike the relatively stable political environment that greeted the Second Crusade, the Balkans were in chaos during the passage of the Third. The Bulgar uprising of 1185 still raged unchecked in 1189, and owing to the confusion the Serbs, in particular, were able to make significant inroads towards their aim of forming an autonomous state independent of Byzantine influence. So whereas Manuel had been able to make careful preparations for the crusaders arrival, in particular in collecting provisions at Serdica, Isaac's means were more limited, and any potential local food surpluses were likely destroyed through years of raids and counter raids throughout the region.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the crusaders very quickly began to run low on provisions once they crossed into Byzantine territory. The force was plagued by attacks from bandits, who targeted foraging parties in particular. The *Historia de Expeditione* states that as the army struggled through the Bulgarian Forest between Branichevo and Naissus there was a heavy death toll among the poor who had already consumed their supplies of food.⁷⁹¹ That the poor are explicitly identified suggests an internal market governing supplies within the army had already formed, and as demand increased prices accordingly rose beyond the ability of the poor to pay. Demand for green fodder also became acute, and those who attempted to forage for '*edible plants or fodder for horses*' away from the main army subsequently fell easy prey to the ambushes of bandits.⁷⁹²

Naissus itself was at this time still '*partially destroyed*' after its sack by Hungarian forces in 1185, nevertheless the army was still provided with markets, and further offered gifts of wine, barley, flour, sheep and oxen by the 'Great Count' Stefan Nemanja and his brother, Casimir.⁷⁹³ Yet when the '*servants and boys of the army*' attempted to pillage the surrounding countryside for supplies of vegetables, corn and honey, disturbances broke out between them and local producers. The Bishop of Würzburg was compelled by Barbarossa to mediate in the dispute, and appealed for calm. This incident suggests that all of the crusaders' needs were likely not being met through the offered markets, and that the demand for food, in particular highly perishable food like vegetables, remained high.

The sheer size of the army, the quality of the roads and its subsequent slow rate of progress created enormous logistical hurdles. In particular its vulnerability would have increased in direct proportion to the size of its baggage train, and this is borne out by the difficulties the crusaders experienced as they traversed the Bulgarian Forest. Before departing from Naissus, the force was therefore split into four separate divisions, with Barbarossa taking up a position in the rear detachment in order to ensure

⁷⁹¹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 60.

⁷⁹² *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 60.

⁷⁹³ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 61.

march discipline was maintained. This division of the army was almost certainly undertaken to ease logistical pressures, especially as it negotiated the narrow passes along the Nishava River, and then through the mountain passes between Serdica and Philippopolis, and was further influenced by the need to better protect the baggage train in particular from attacks on the vulnerable flanks of the marching column.

This division would also have made setting up and breaking camp far more efficient. If the army had marched as a single unit, the lead elements would have needed to stop far sooner in the day to establish camp, in order for the rear of the army to be able to reach it by nightfall.⁷⁹⁴ This was clearly a concern for a force this large, and the *Historia de Expeditione* states that on the journey south from Branichevo, those who were 'last into camp' were specifically targeted by bandits.⁷⁹⁵ Indeed if the army had been exceptionally large, and the route so narrow it offered little opportunity to widen the frontage of the army as it marched, it was highly possible that because of the time it took to break camp, some elements in the rear would inevitably be required to march into the evening. The establishment of secure camp sites in order to avoid the necessity of marching at night, and the breaking up of a force into mutually supporting divisions, is specifically suggested in the *Taktikon Vari* as a necessary expedient for an army negotiating narrow passes where ambushes are to be expected.⁷⁹⁶ After reaching Philippopolis, a further fifth division was formed, suggesting that this arrangement had proven a beneficial one.

The sources further imply that in order to combat the incessant attacks of bandits, before departing Naissus Barbarossa arranged the army along similar lines to the famous 'fighting march' that had evolved during the crusading period. Louis VII, for instance, during the Second Crusade, had taken care to ensure that front and rear guards were appointed each day whilst traversing Asia Minor in constant threat of Turkish ambush.⁷⁹⁷ Bitter experience proved the necessity of maintaining strict march discipline whilst negotiating difficult terrain, with each man to hold his place in the line and suffer the enemy's attacks without leaving it. The baggage and wounded, who were carried on carts, were assembled in the middle of the column, guarded by armed men, and with further forces protecting the van and the rear. In this manner, according to Odo, the force '*proceeded safely, but not very advantageously*.'⁷⁹⁸ Smail describes how a similar arrangement was adopted by King Baldwin III in 1147 during a march to occupy Bosra. As with the Third Crusade, wagons were used to carry the sick

⁷⁹⁴ The mechanics associated with an army breaking camp are the source of some debate. For further discussion see Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 164.

⁷⁹⁵ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 60.

⁷⁹⁶ *Taktikon Vari*, p. 299-301.

⁷⁹⁷ R. C. Smail, *Crusading Warfare, 1097-1193* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 157.

⁷⁹⁸ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 111.

and the wounded, and any man who left his ordained position in the ranks whilst marching was threatened with severe penalties.⁷⁹⁹

The fighting march would become one of the defining features of crusading warfare, and although it slowed the rate of progress, it allowed the efficient movement of men and material in hostile territory whilst guarding against attacks that sought to target the weakest sections of the column. It is therefore not surprising that Barbarossa, who had participated in the Second Crusade and experienced its hardships, adopted such an approach when similar difficulties confronted the Third Crusade in the Balkans. Units of cavalry covered both the van and the rear, with his son, Frederick, the Duke of Swabia, taking the van, whilst he himself led the rear. Crossbowmen were posted along the flanks to counter the missile fire of ambushers, and further detachments of knights were also positioned here to drive off attacks with sorties, such as that delivered by the Bishop of Passau, and his relative the Duke of Merania who, along with an armed escort, drove away an attempted attack upon the baggage train as the force negotiated the passes along the Nishava River.⁸⁰⁰

These precautions, with their attendant slowing of the rate of march, would have resulted in the crusader column becoming distended over an exceptionally long distance. Whilst the composite nature of the sources covering Barbarossa's march creates a rather confusing situation in regards to specific dates, this can be accounted for by what Nesbitt describes as a 'charming logic'.⁸⁰¹ In essence, Nesbitt argues, the different dates given across the various sources relating to the expedition reflect the relative position of each author within the army. The author of the *Historia de Expeditione*, for instance, is accompanying Barbarossa's party at the head of the army, so initially provides dates earlier than those in the other sources, such as the *Historia peregrinorum*. After leaving Naissus, however, when Barbarossa takes up a position with the rear of the army, the dates given by the *Historia de Expeditione* are henceforth later than those provided by the *Historia peregrinorum*, so whilst the *Historia de Expeditione* states that the force reached Serdica on August 13, the *Historia peregrinorum* provides instead the date of August 11.⁸⁰²

A further intriguing example occurs when the army reached the city of Philippopolis. The *Historia de Expeditione* relates that while the city of Philippopolis was reached on August 24, Barbarossa himself

⁷⁹⁹ Smail, *Crusading warfare*, p. 158.

⁸⁰⁰ The presence of a large number of bishops was a distinctive feature of military campaigns under the Salian and Hohenstaufen dynasties, see K. F. Krieger, 'Obligatory military service and the use of mercenaries in imperial military campaigns under the Hohenstaufen emperors', in A. Haverkamp & H. Vollrath eds., *England and Germany in the High Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1996), p. 155.

⁸⁰¹ Nesbitt, 'The rate of march of Crusading armies in Europe', p. 178.

⁸⁰² Nesbitt, 'The rate of march of Crusading armies in Europe', p. 178.

did not enter it till the 26th.⁸⁰³ Nesbitt interprets this as to mean that while the head of the army reached the city on the 24th, the rear division did not arrive till three days later owing to the fact that it had become strung out over an extraordinary distance whilst it exited the Succi Pass and began traversing the Maritsa Valley.⁸⁰⁴ Loud, in his translation of the text, points out that the *Historia peregrinorum* clearly states that on the orders of the emperor the army initially encamped outside the walls of Philippopolis for a number of days.⁸⁰⁵ Brand suggests that this may have been because Barbarossa regarded the abandoned city with suspicion, possibly suspecting a Byzantine trap.⁸⁰⁶

The two passages are not inherently exclusive however, and if the force had been spread out over many days marching distance, with Barbarossa himself still a number of days distant from the city when it was reached by the van, there are a number of reasons as to why he might wish for the lead elements of the army to await his arrival before entering. The first is that he may well have expected a trap, given the curious haste with which the Byzantines had abandoned it. Certainly the crusaders were by this time ready to believe Byzantium was capable of all manner of duplicitous behaviour. The second is that concerned by the increasingly intransigent position taken by the Byzantine emperor, and the need for his co-operation in order for the force to be transported across the straits, Barbarossa likely concluded that the city may need to be occupied for some time whilst the impasse was resolved. This standoff was confirmed when, the day after the army reached Philippopolis, messengers arrived to inform Barbarossa that the emperor had not only forbid any further progress, but had seized his ambassadors to the Byzantine court and placed them under arrest.⁸⁰⁷

In the Balkans the end of the campaigning season usually occurred in late autumn, and in the Ottoman Empire the approach of the day of Kasim (St Demetrius' day, 26th October) ordinarily marked the end of the Turkish campaigns on land and sea.⁸⁰⁸ Given the slow rate of progress, Barbarossa, therefore, likely had already concluded that securing a safe base of operations in event of continuing Byzantine intransigence was a priority, and this dramatic turn of events effectively robbed the crusaders of any possibility of crossing the straits before the year was out. The fertile Maritsa Valley, where the harvest would be collected in November, offered a valuable opportunity to pause and take stock of the situation. Allowing an unsupervised occupation of the city could have led to widespread looting and devastation, undermining this intent, for, as the *Historia de Expeditione* states, the crusaders entered

⁸⁰³ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 86.

⁸⁰⁴ Nesbitt, 'The rate of march of Crusading armies in Europe', p. 180.

⁸⁰⁵ *Historia peregrinorum*, p. 140, The Latin text reads, 'antequam urbem ex precepto serenissimi imperatoris intrarent, aliquot diebus in castris extra menia conmanserunt'.

⁸⁰⁶ Brand, *Byzantium confronts the West*, p. 180.

⁸⁰⁷ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 69.

⁸⁰⁸ Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, p. 253.

the city intending for it to serve as their '*new home*'.⁸⁰⁹ Indeed, the author of the *Historia* claimed that in hindsight this delay seemed to have been the cause of divine clemency, as otherwise they would have been required to march through the '*wastelands of Romania during the harsh winter season, in which both men and animals would have suffered through bad weather and lack of food.*'⁸¹⁰

A third factor is introduced by the presence of the native 'Armenian' population of the city who remained behind to await the arrival of the crusaders. Again, given the expectation that the city would need to be occupied for some time, ensuring the collaboration of the local population was an important precaution to take, and Barbarossa may have wished to be on hand when these first meetings took place. Ultimately the crusader host was able to establish a close rapport with local inhabitants, both Armenians and Bulgarians, who in return for their protection provided a market at Philippopolis for the duration of their stay.⁸¹¹

Certainly these factors seem to be more plausible than having the entire crusader army camping outside an abandoned city for a number of days before entering it. Instead only the lead elements waited outside the city until Barbarossa himself arrived, and began its formal occupation. This particular scenario, therefore, provides an opportunity to test the oft repeated remark that Barbarossa's force was so large that it took three days to pass a single spot.⁸¹² If the size of the force, and the dimensions of the road, can be estimated, then the length of the army can therefore be modelled, providing a means with which to test the hypothesis that whilst the head of the army reached Philippopolis on the 24th, the rear was still three days marching distance behind.

A complete logistical model of the passage of the Barbarossa's force across the Balkans would entail far greater attention than such a question can be afforded in this thesis. Indeed a great deal of new research, in particular in regards to the carrying capacity of the regions encompassed, would need to be undertaken before such a question could even be approached. Even considerations of water availability are far more complex than appearances might suggest. With the exception of some parts of the overland route across Thrace, there were plentiful sources of water along the course of the *Via Militaris*, through both rivers and springs.⁸¹³ That is not to say, however, that access to water would not have been an ongoing concern for the crusader host, as watering large numbers of horses and beasts of burden would have proven both difficult and time consuming, especially along rivers, such as the Maritsa, which were swampy along their banks. Such conditions would sometimes have

⁸⁰⁹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 69.

⁸¹⁰ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 94.

⁸¹¹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 74-5.

⁸¹² For instance see Nesbitt, *The rate of march of crusading armies in Europe*, p. 179.

⁸¹³ Great Britain Naval Intelligence Division, *Handbook of Turkey in Europe*, p. 197.

required water to be brought to the animals, rather than visa versa, and even when easy access along the banks was available, the vast numbers of pack animals attached to the force would have occupied long stretches of river bank, requiring close supervision, especially given the frequency of bandit attacks and the easy targets the animals would have represented. Given the complexity of modelling such variables however, availability of water will be discounted entirely, although it was surely an ever present concern for the crusaders.

The intention instead is not to provide an exhaustive catalogue of all the attendant logistical requirements of this force, but rather to more generally display how both its size and the quality of the road upon which it travelled would have impacted upon its line of march and increased its exposure to the threat of ambush. Therefore this thesis will focus on a more modest depiction of Barbarossa's passage of the Balkans, and seek only to determine the length of the column the crusaders formed as they marched in order to represent how difficult such an undertaking was in practice. Indeed it will be seen that the crusaders' cohesiveness during this difficult period represents a remarkable achievement of logistical planning, military discipline and strong leadership.

As Bachrach notes, all studies of logistics must start with numbers.⁸¹⁴ The first necessary calculation is of the crusaders' rate of march. Whilst we possess dates and locations, this is complicated by the fact the sources provide no allowance for rest days, or delays encountered gathering supplies or crossing rivers. For instance, Nesbitt calculates that of the 89 days it took Duke Godfrey's contingent of the First Crusade to march from Burch to Constantinople, only 59 were spent actually marching, and equally of the 103 days it took Peter the Hermit to reach Constantinople from Cologne, 86 were spent on the march.⁸¹⁵

Medieval sources typically provide very little information as to the frequency of days an army spent resting whilst on campaign. Rest days were specifically prescribed by Byzantine *Taktika* before going into battle, or when enemy activity was expected, while the *Taktikon Vari* suggests that infantry are to be given a full days' rest before attempting to negotiate a mountain pass where an enemy ambush was expected.⁸¹⁶ For crusader forces the sources suggest that each stage of the march must have been punishing on both men and animals, who would require long periods of convalescence afterwards. Duke Godfrey's contingent of the First Crusade, for instance, marched from the Danube to Naissus,

⁸¹⁴ Bachrach, 'The Crusader March from Dorylaion to Herakleia, 4 July –ca. 2 September 1097', p. 45.

⁸¹⁵ Nesbitt, *The rate of march of crusading armies in Europe*, p. 172.

⁸¹⁶ *Taktikon Vari*, p. 299.

where it spent four days recovering, and then spent a further eight days resting once the force reached Philippopolis.⁸¹⁷

Long marches such as these would have placed great strain on the horses in particular, and the need to allow them the time to effectively recover, as well as the complication of reshoeing, would have necessitated long layovers. Horses would typically have needed, at the very least, one day of rest in every six in order to overcome the numerous issues that long marches would give rise to. In later periods generals showed a far greater concern for the wellbeing of their soldiers, and their mounts. Frederick the Great, for example, insisted that Prussian armies were to rest one day for every three days spent on the march.⁸¹⁸ Crusader marches likely followed far more punishing schedules than this, and it is no surprise, therefore, that they exacted a heavy toll amongst their participants, and a long tail of stragglers was common.

It is impossible to accurately determine the number and frequency of rest days in Barbarossa's march through the literature alone. Nesbitt, in his analysis of the march, inserts an arbitrary four day delay between Naissus and Serdica in order to account for the fighting that occurred along this stretch of the route.⁸¹⁹ Nevertheless, the rates of march that Nesbitt calculates along the *Via Militaris* are largely uniform, with the army averaging 8 miles (approximately 13 kilometres) per day between Branichevo and Naissus, and then 8.5 miles (approximately 13.5 kilometres) between Naissus and Serdica, and then the same rate again between Serdica and Philippopolis.⁸²⁰ These numbers, whilst slow, are not surprising given the difficulties the force was presented with, and are typical of large armies that contained both a baggage and a supply train.⁸²¹ As will be seen, given the practical limitations it faced, the crusader force could hardly have marched any faster than this.

The second necessary calculation is the size of the army. Estimating the size of medieval armies is fraught with difficulties owing to over exaggeration within contemporary sources, and this is only compounded when dealing with a force such as Barbarossa's. Rumour of Barbarossa's approach swelled the force he led to astronomical proportions, and in Arabic sources it is claimed he led as many as a quarter of a million men.⁸²² Some more modern evaluations which calculate the force at over

⁸¹⁷ Nesbitt, *The rate of march of crusading armies in Europe*, p. 172.

⁸¹⁸ Frederick the Great, *Des marches d'armee, at de ce qu'il faut observer a' cet egard*, trans. J. Luvaas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War* (New York, 1966), p. 103.

⁸¹⁹ Nesbitt, *The rate of march of crusading armies in Europe*, p. 179.

⁸²⁰ Nesbitt, *The rate of march of crusading armies in Europe*, p. 179.

⁸²¹ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 165.

⁸²² Baha' al-Din Ibn Shaddad, *Al-Nawādir al-Sulṭāniyya wa'l-Maḥāsin al-Yūsufiyya*, trans. D. S. Richards, *The rare and excellent history of Saladin* (Aldershot, 2002), p. 106.

100,000 participants are scarcely more believable.⁸²³ Both Eickhoff⁸²⁴ and Murray⁸²⁵ estimate that the force Barbarossa commanded amounted to some 12,000-15,000 men, of whom a high proportion were mounted knights. Loud agrees with this figure, and further fixes the number of knights at approximately 3,000.⁸²⁶

If such figures seem low (and they may be conservative estimates) it must be remembered that medieval armies were typically quite small. Haldon estimates that a typical force the Byzantine Empire could put into the field during this period likely numbered little more than 10,000 soldiers.⁸²⁷ On occasions larger forces than this were assembled, such as for Manuel's campaign in 1176 that ended disastrously at the Battle of Myriokephalon, however these were notable exceptions, and likely necessitated the weakening of defences in other parts of the empire. It was not necessarily a function of manpower and finances that limited the size of field armies, although these were important factors, but also the means available of supplying them, the ability of the road network to support such numbers and assembling the vast numbers of pack animals that would be required to accompany it.

It is also important to note that Barbarossa was determined to ensure his force was not slowed down by hordes of non-combatants, who would have inflated the size of the force whilst adding nothing, or even detracting from its fighting capability. Accordingly Barbarossa *'forbade anyone on foot, or who lacked the capacity in the use of arms, also anyone who could not finance themselves for the journey for at least two years, from undertaking the way of pilgrimage with him, since a weak and unwarlike crowd was customarily more of a hindrance than a help to such a difficult expedition.'*⁸²⁸ The *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et gesta Regis Ricardi* further states that a great many wagons were constructed so that sick travellers could be carried and hence not slow the expedition.⁸²⁹

Such measures display a great deal of foresight. Indeed, the *Taktikon Vari* explicitly advised that all unnecessary baggage and non-combatants were to be left behind before embarking on a campaign in the Balkans, warning that, *'It is extremely harmful, as it seemed to the ancient authorities and as experience has proven to us, to bring along a useless crowd of noncombatants in hostile territory, or more baggage than is really needed, or a large number of mules, asses, or camels. This is especially*

⁸²³ K. Setton, 'The Crusades of Frederick Barbarossa and Henry VI' in K. Setton, gen. ed., *A History of the Crusades, Vol. 2: the later Crusades 1189-1311* (Madison, 1969), p. 92,

⁸²⁴ Eickhoff, *Friedrich Barbarossa im Orient*, p. 47.

⁸²⁵ A. Murray, 'Finance and logistics of the Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa', in I. Shagir ed., *In laudem Hierosolymitani; Studies in Crusades and medieval culture in honour of Benjamin Z. Kedar* (Aldershot, 2007), p. 364.

⁸²⁶ Loud, *The Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa*, p. 19.

⁸²⁷ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 103.

⁸²⁸ *Historia peregrinorum*, p. 144.

⁸²⁹ *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et gesta Regis Ricardi*, trans. H. J. Nicholson, *Chronicle of the Third Crusade; a translation of the Itinerarium peregrinorum et gesta Regis Ricardi* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 55.

*true in the land of the Bulgarians, in which there are rugged, wooded mountain passes with very narrow roads. If an army plans to traverse these roads, such a crowd will greatly slow it down. When the army brings along a useless crowd, unnecessary baggage, luxury items, expensive equipment which serves no purpose, then a journey of one day will not be completed even in four.*⁸³⁰

Shedding an army of cumbersome followers is an extremely effective means of enabling it to not only move faster, but also respond far quicker to threats. In Engels words, a similar dramatic reduction in size of the baggage train turned the Macedonian army of Alexander the Great into the fastest, lightest and most mobile force in existence.⁸³¹ Barbarossa likely had a similar intention in mind, with the challenges faced by the Second Crusade in traversing Asia Minor at the forefront of his planning.

This analysis will therefore be based upon the assumption that Barbarossa was leading a force of some 12,000 infantry and 3,000 mounted knights, giving a total force of approximately 15,000.⁸³² Despite Barbarossa's intention of shedding the force of useless non-combatants, the size of the force would not have been a hard 15,000 effectives however, as it still would have required muleteers to guide the pack animals, squires to lead a knight's warhorse, drivers for the wagons, and any number of other specialists who accompanied the force, such as blacksmiths and engineers. The *Historia de Expeditione*, for instance, makes numerous references to 'servants and boys' who accompanied the army, and assisted in the gathering of fodder. An estimation of the number of attendant followers who accompanied a Roman legion on campaign, by comparison, which likewise emphasised speed and mobility on the march, is approximately 1,000.⁸³³

For a crusading force these numbers were likely even higher. For instance each knight who participated in the expedition would have brought along a number of retainers, typically a squire and a groom, along with at least one remount, and as many as four pack animals carrying needed equipment, money, fodder and food. The knight's main warhorse would be led by the squire and carried as little weight as possible in order to keep it in peak condition. So in total a single knight could actually encompass as many as three participants, and at least two horses, before further pack animals are considered.⁸³⁴ Given the number of knights that accompanied the force, it can quickly be seen how non-combatants, despite Barbarossa's intentions, must have constituted a sizeable proportion of the total army. In order to keep the model as simple as possible, the number of non-combatants, however, will not be considered. That they represented a vital contingent of the army is undeniable, but

⁸³⁰ *Taktikon Vari*, p. 287-9.

⁸³¹ Engels, *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian army*, p. 119.

⁸³² Despite Barbarossa's demand that those who marched on foot were not to make the journey, a large number of infantry inevitably accompanied the force.

⁸³³ J. Peddie, *The Roman War Machine* (Gloucestershire, 1994), p. 52.

⁸³⁴ For these calculations see Pryor, 'Introduction: modelling Bohemond's march to Thessalonike', p. 7-9.

Barbarossa's strict prohibitions against participants who could not support themselves, and the attrition suffered on the slow march south from the Danube River, means that they likely did not represent as heavy a burden as they did to previous crusades.

The third estimate regards the width of the road itself. This is a question to which, at present, no definitive answer exists. We know very little of the mechanics or administrative apparatus which governed Byzantine road construction and maintenance. Indeed, given the paucity of the available evidence, it seems almost certain that no formalised structures pertaining to road work existed at all, and instead it operated on an ad hoc basis, driven by imperial diktat and undertaken by provincial officials. Such measures may have been adequate to maintain key roads in a nominally usable state, at least in those regions where the necessary labour could be found. Per the arguments raised above, it will be assumed that the road utilised by the crusaders possessed a consistent width of 5.5 metres, allowing five men, or two horses, to march abreast. Whilst this is a gross assumption, given the dimensions of the original road, it is not, perhaps, an unreasonable one.

The fourth, and final, estimate regards the size of the accompanying baggage train. If we were to take as a basis, for instance, an army consisting of four Roman legions and a road 5.5 metres wide, it would, along with its necessary baggage, form on the march a column approximately 25 kilometres long, from its forward scouts to its rear guard.⁸³⁵ This estimation is also based upon the assumption that the baggage train would carry enough provisions to supply the army for ten days, before needing to be resupplied. In consequence the resultant baggage train alone accounts for approximately half of this calculated distance.

It is possible that Barbarossa's force may have carried even more provisions than this, enough for twenty days on the march. This seems a reasonable assumption given Barbarossa's careful preparations for the expedition, and accounts for the six days it took to unload the accompanying ships at Branichevo. Twenty days' worth of supplies is also roughly equivalent to the carrying capacity of the knight's troop modelled above, including dry fodder for the horses.⁸³⁶ Literary evidence indicates that forces were certainly in the practice of transporting relatively large quantities of food whilst on the march. The *Codex Theodosianus* prescribed that soldiers on campaign were to receive from the state's storehouses rations enough to last twenty days,⁸³⁷ and Maurice's *Strategikon* likewise stipulated that soldiers must be provided with adequate rations to sustain them in the field.⁸³⁸ The

⁸³⁵ Peddie, *The Roman War Machine*, p. 57-8.

⁸³⁶ Pryor calculates that the modelled troop could carry provisions enough for 17-18 days, 'Introduction: modelling Bohemond's march to Thessalonike', p. 19.

⁸³⁷ *Codex Theodosianus*, p. 159.

⁸³⁸ Maurice, *Strategikon*, p. 67.

Taktikon Vari similarly insisted that armies must bring ample supplies of food with them if they were to operate effectively in enemy territory, in particular emphasising the necessity of bringing stocks of dry fodder when campaigning in the Balkans, as supplies of barley were otherwise impossible to obtain.⁸³⁹

For the Third Crusade the difficulty of transporting the large amounts of supplies, for both men and animals, necessitated the use of a separate supply train that included carts as well as pack animals. Horses, mules and donkeys are all extremely inefficient at carrying large loads, at least in comparison to what a human can achieve, with all being unable to carry more than approximately 20% of their own body mass without risking injury.⁸⁴⁰ A horse can carry a maximum weight of roughly 113 kilograms, therefore a ridden horse would have been able to carry only an extra 30 or 40 kilograms of supplies above the weight of the rider, a saddle horse around 80 kilograms, whilst an un-ridden horse without a saddle might carry approximately 100 kilograms of supplies.⁸⁴¹ In comparison donkeys and mules can carry loads of approximately 76 and 105 kilograms respectively. Whilst these loads were no doubt exceeded on occasion (perhaps even routinely), doing so increased the risk of injury to the animal.

Even more efficient again at transporting large loads are two-wheeled carts and four-wheeled wagons, both of which were widely used by Roman legions. Bachrach has calculated that two-wheeled carts could carry 500 kilograms, whilst their four-wheeled equivalents could accommodate 650 kilograms.⁸⁴² Odo of Deuil informs us that both two and four wheeled wagons were used on the Second Crusade, and despite Odo's reservations over their usefulness, the sources suggest that both types were again employed by Barbarossa's force to carry baggage and money, as well as to transport sick and injured crusaders.⁸⁴³ It has been calculated that under optimal conditions a two-wheel mule-drawn cart could cover as much as 30 kilometres per day; an ox-drawn four-wheeled vehicle, between 15 and 24 kilometres per day, depending on the number of sunlight hours available.⁸⁴⁴

There is no uniform consensus as to how much food a soldier required each day whilst on campaign, and hard numbers are conflated by the fact that troops no doubt added to their daily provisions

⁸³⁹ *Taktikon Vari*, p. 303-5.

⁸⁴⁰ J. Pryor, 'Introduction: modelling Bohemond's march to Thessalonike', p. 19.

⁸⁴¹ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 283. Also see discussion in Pryor, 'Introduction: modelling Bohemond's march to Thessalonike', p. 18-9.

⁸⁴² B. S. Bachrach, 'Animals and warfare in early medieval Europe', *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di sull'alto Medioevo*, 31 (1985), p. 717.

⁸⁴³ Odo of Deuil, *De profectione Ludovici VII in orientem*, p. 31.

⁸⁴⁴ J. Roth, *The logistics of the Roman army at war, 264 B.C.-A.D. 235* (Boston, 1999), p. 208-12. Also see J. Haldon, *et al*, 'Marching across Anatolia: Medieval Logistics and Modelling the Mantzikert Campaign', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 65/66 (2011-2012), p. 216-20. On the development of the medieval wagon see Leighton, *Transport and communication in Early Medieval Europe AD 500-1100*, p. 112-25.

through the pillaging of local supplies as they marched. In terms of the 'biscuit' that was the staple ration of marching men from the Roman period through to the First World War, estimates range from 1 to 1.3 kilograms per day.⁸⁴⁵ This was carried either as flour or prebaked biscuit on a soldier's back, and a twenty day supply of twenty kilograms is not an unreasonable load to expect a soldier to carry.⁸⁴⁶ Stocks could be supplemented with supplies obtained in the field, and ground wheat was baked in field ovens, or simply placed into the ashes of camp fires, in order to produce more biscuit.⁸⁴⁷ The use of hand mills and field ovens for this purpose was a vital prerequisite for ensuring an army maintained its coherence whilst on the march, and didn't disintegrate into a ragtag collection of foraging parties. Frederick the Great, for instance, insisted that field ovens were employed in his armies, with soldiers to be properly instructed in their use, and fresh supplies of bread were to be baked each time the army made camp to ensure at least ten days of supplies were always at hand.⁸⁴⁸ Crusaders would certainly have been familiar with the necessity of harvesting, grinding and baking wheat in the field, and Peter the Hermit, for instance, sought to harvest local crops in order to acquire badly needed provisions after their baggage train was lost outside of Naissus.⁸⁴⁹

Estimating the attendant baggage train accompanying Barbarossa's force is further complicated by the wealth the crusaders brought with them. Through uncovered hoards this can be seen to have typically taken the form of un-minted silver bars or ingots, silver pennies of various types, and other assorted objects with a high intrinsic value such as jewellery and gold and silver plate.⁸⁵⁰ Such bulky items, especially the unwieldy silver ingots and plate, could not be carried personally during the journey, and so were likely transported in carts, which would have needed to be closely guarded at all times. That this constituted a wearisome burden can be inferred through the decision to leave this money behind, along with the crusaders baggage, when the bulk of the army departed Philippopolis for Adrianople.⁸⁵¹

How much of the crusaders' supply requirements was alleviated by the carrying capacity of the wagons that were employed is therefore difficult to ascertain for they would have been used to fulfil a wide variety of roles, from carrying tents and camping equipment, field ovens, sick and injured soldiers, blacksmithing tools and horseshoes, as well as the aforementioned material wealth of the crusaders.

⁸⁴⁵ Haldon, 'The organization and support of an expeditionary force; manpower and logistics in the Middle Byzantine period', p. 124-6.

⁸⁴⁶ Haldon, 'The organization and support of an expeditionary force; manpower and logistics in the Middle Byzantine period', p. 124.

⁸⁴⁷ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 284.

⁸⁴⁸ Frederick the Great, *Des marches d'armee, at de ce qu'il faut observer a' cet egard*, p. 109.

⁸⁴⁹ Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, p. 27.

⁸⁵⁰ Murray, 'Finance and logistics of the Crusade of Frederick Barbarossa', p. 364.

⁸⁵¹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 80.

It is similarly difficult to estimate how many wagons may have accompanied the host. Manuel is reported to have employed 3,000 wagons in his army in 1176.⁸⁵² It seems highly unlikely that such numbers accompanied the crusader host, and although it is difficult to estimate their numbers exactly, more than a few hundred seems unlikely. For the purposes of this model it will be assumed that the wagons were not used to carry any food or fodder, but rather were dedicated to transporting the crusader's material wealth, plus the manifold other goods that were regularly taken whilst on campaign.

If Barbarossa's force indeed carried food reserves enough for twenty days, it is possible to roughly estimate the number of pack animals required to carry both the soldiers' provisions and dry fodder. Given an assumed size of 15,000 men and 6,000 horses (including remounts), and using the calculations regarding daily provisions provided by Haldon, we can estimate that it would require 32,700 kilograms of provisions per day.⁸⁵³ If this entire load was carried by pack animals, a staggering 12,576 of them would be required. Not only would these have occupied an enormous physical space within the army's line of march, and needed close supervision at all times, but the difficulties in simply assembling such vast numbers of animals in the first place must have been an almost impossible difficulty to overcome.

This number can be reduced, however, if the remounts were required to carry provisions too, lowering the number of pack animals to a still impressive 8,653. This could have been even further reduced by the infantry carrying their provisions on their backs, resulting in 6,576 pack animals being required. However this was likely not always the case, and especially during a fighting march each soldier could not be expected to carry a full twenty days of provisions on his back. In this scenario it is likely that provisions were stored with the supply train in order to allow soldiers to better defend themselves. Although, by the same token, when the army departed Naissus it was quite likely not carrying with it a full complement of twenty days provisions anymore, as it is unlikely that the city possessed the resources to resupply the entire army. Since this model is not intended to be an exact replica of Barbarossa's march, instead merely a rough estimate, a compromise number of 6,000 pack animals will be used.

With such a large number of pack animals, the amount of fodder required along the march is an important consideration, especially for an army negotiating a region such as the Morava Valley where little opportunity for resupply existed. Byzantine military treatises suggest that 24 days' supply of dry

⁸⁵² Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 166.

⁸⁵³ For these equations see Appendix 3 of Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 287-292.

fodder, typically barley, was to be made available for major campaigns, particularly into the Balkans where supplies were otherwise at a premium, and it is likely that a similar amount of dry fodder was carried by the crusaders.⁸⁵⁴ This fodder, tied into bundles, would have been carried by the above pack animals, or if need be on the accompanying wagons. If the army was required to carry green fodder as well though this quickly explodes the number of required pack animals out to utterly unworkable proportions, especially given that the law of diminishing returns would apply, and each extra pack animal added to the army would, in turn, only further increase its demand for fodder.⁸⁵⁵ Therefore only a minimum amount of green fodder was likely transported by the army, and almost certainly no more than five days' worth.

Using these estimations, it is possible to make some rough calculations as to the length of the column the army formed.⁸⁵⁶ Under optimal conditions a force of 12,000 infantry and 3,000 cavalry, on a road 5.5 metres wide, would have formed a column approximately 17 kilometres long, with the infantry, marching five abreast, covering approximately 4.8 kilometres, and the 6,000 horses (including remounts) forming a double column of 12 kilometres. If we were to estimate that 6,000 pack animals were able to march three abreast, with each 2.5 metres long and a further 2.5 metres between each rank in case one were to stumble and fall, at its most basic computation such a baggage train would be at least 10 kilometres long. Realistically it was likely even longer than this, with the gaps between each rank being even wider.⁸⁵⁷ If two hundred wagons were added, progressing two abreast, and ten metres apart, this adds a further kilometre, at least, to the baggage train.

These rough calculations indicate that under ideal conditions the army formed a column on the march roughly 28 kilometres long (Figure 91). Clearly Barbarossa's force did not proceed under optimal conditions however, and even before additional non-combatants are considered, the partitioning of the army into four divisions creates further complications, as the infantry and cavalry did not all march together, and therefore form the most efficient column possible. Instead they were split into groups, with crossbow-armed infantry covering the flanks of the column, whilst besides being located at the van and the rear, units of cavalry were further interspersed along the line. The gaps between each division must also be taken into account.

⁸⁵⁴ *Taktikon Vari*, p. 303-5.

⁸⁵⁵ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 168-70.

⁸⁵⁶ These calculations are derived from Bachrach, 'The Crusader March from Dorylaion to Herakleia, 4 July –ca. 2 September 1097', p. 56-7.

⁸⁵⁷ In his study of the logistics of a Roman legion, Peddie assumes a distance of approximately five metres between each pack animal, Peddie, *The Roman War Machine*, p. 57.

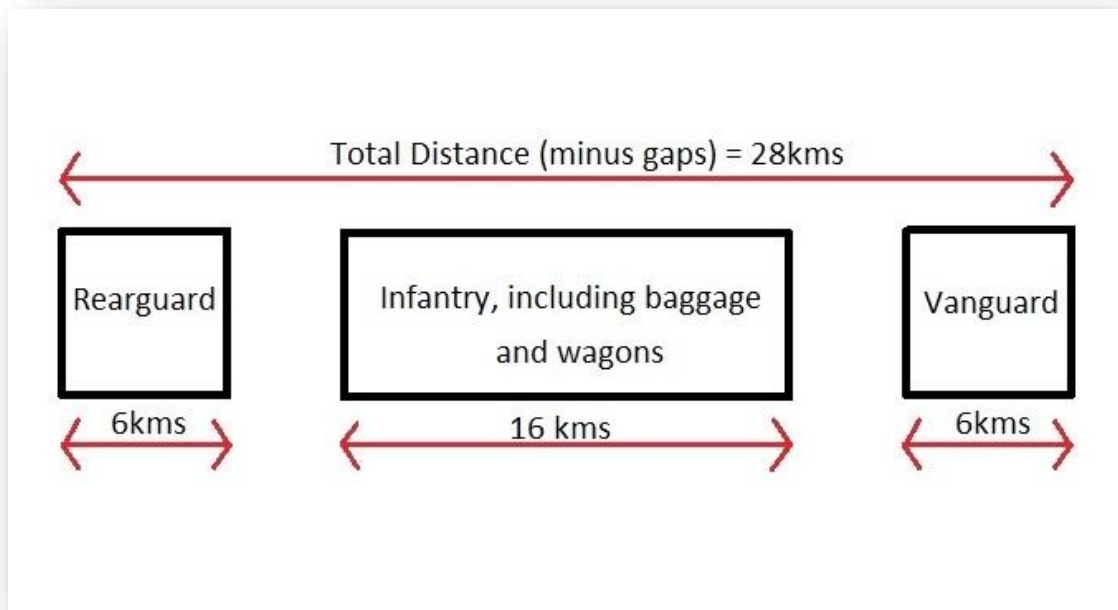


Figure 91: A hypothetical diagrammatical representation of the crusader column as it marched.

The speed of the marching infantry creates a further consideration. Peddie calculates that Julius Caesar's army of six Roman legions in Gaul, including its baggage train, formed a column near 33 kilometres long.⁸⁵⁸ In this example the infantry marched at approximately 4.5 kilometres per hour, which is standard for infantry across history. Each camp along the route was located approximately fifteen kilometres from the other, which allowed the entire army, with 10.5 hours of available sunlight, to safely encamp at the end of each stage. Pryor calculates that Bohemond's force during the First Crusade would typically have had ten hours of sunlight a day on its march to Thessalonica. Deducting an hour for the vanguard to eat, tend to its animals, and decamp, would have reduced this to effectively nine hours marching time.⁸⁵⁹

However the necessity of protecting the baggage train meant that Barbarossa's force would have been moving even slower than this. In normal circumstances much of this extra baggage would have been left behind or if possible sent ahead, particularly whilst the army negotiated difficult territory. But clearly crusade expeditions did not operate under normal circumstances, and the necessity of conveying and protecting this material on the march introduced extraordinary difficulties to be overcome. Small horse or mule-drawn wagons are capable of travelling at 4.5 kilometres per hour,

⁸⁵⁸ Peddie, *The Roman War Machine*, p. 74.

⁸⁵⁹ Pryor, 'Introduction: modelling Bohemond's march to Thessalonike', p. 6-7.

and can therefore keep pace with the infantry, but larger four-wheeled oxen-drawn wagons travel far slower.

Oxen, whilst able to survive on a diet of grass and hay, and therefore not requiring the oats or barley required by horses, are extremely slow moving and can only reach speeds of perhaps 2.5 kilometres per hour.⁸⁶⁰ It is likely that packs of oxen accompanied the force from the outset, being used to haul the crusaders baggage and money reserves, and the *Historia de Expeditione* makes clear more were gifted to the crusaders at Naissus. Given approximately nine hours of sunlight available, in addition to such complications as poor sections of the road, breakdowns, or even the time it took for the wagons to decamp each morning as they would have marched in the middle of the column where they could be best protected, these oxen-drawn wagons would typically have only been able to cover at best 15 kilometres a day, slowing the entire force down to this speed.⁸⁶¹ It comes as, therefore, no surprise that Odo of Deuil complained so bitterly about the inclusion of heavy wagons in the Second Crusade.

If we were to subsequently estimate the size of each separate division, then it is possible to therefore formulate a rough idea of how long it would have taken to break camp if it had available nine hours of sunlight, and was marching at 2.5 kilometres per hour in order to protect the valuable oxen-drawn wagons. A vanguard of 1,000 knights, including remounts, would take roughly an hour to leave camp. The next two divisions, each possibly comprising of 6,000 infantry, 500 knights, 3,000 pack animals and 100 wagons, would take at least two hours each to decamp. Finally the vanguard would take another hour. It would therefore take, at the absolute least, six hours for the entire army to decamp. Given that Nesbitt calculates that each stage was approximately 13 kilometres long, this would take five hours for an army marching at 2.5 kilometres per hour to complete. As a consequence, most of the third division, as well as the vanguard, could not hope to reach the next camp before sunset. This scenario is, even assuming the army worked like clockwork and nothing impeded its march each day, clearly unworkable, and likely accounts for the heavy attrition suffered from bandit attacks during the march south to Naissus.

After the army was broken into separate divisions at Naissus, the second and third divisions together could potentially march thirteen kilometres per day on their own, although it would have been close run thing. It would have taken near four hours for these divisions to fully decamp, and given the necessary five hours marching time the last elements would have been entering camp just as evening was falling. For this to occur maintenance of march discipline would have been imperative, and it

⁸⁶⁰ The exact speed of oxen-drawn wagons is a source of some debate, see Roth, *The logistics of the Roman army at war*, p. 211.

⁸⁶¹ Bachrach, 'Animals and warfare in early medieval Europe', p. 718-9.

would have been particularly punishing on the beasts of burden, as well as non-combatants not accustomed to spending long days marching. Such pressures would have been alleviated somewhat in open terrain, such as in the Maritsa Valley, where the army could expand its frontage and march along both sides of the road. But in narrow confines, such as the Succi Pass or along the Nishava River, where there was limited opportunity for the army to widen its front and spread out beyond the margins of the road, the maintenance of march discipline was of vital importance. Barbarossa's decision to position himself at the rear of the army indicates he was well aware of this issues, and the need to continuously, day after day, drive the force onwards.

The picture that therefore emerges of the crusader army as it marched, was that the van was likely positioned well ahead of the main force to avoid unnecessary traffic jams, and its role was to ensure that the path ahead was clear for the following divisions, which needed to keep moving forwards at all costs lest its logistical demands became overwhelming. The main body of the army was split into the aforementioned two divisions, one containing the Hungarians and Bohemians and the other the German infantry. These divisions contained both its baggage and supplies, and therefore marched as one slowly moving whole, with detachments of crossbowmen and cavalry protecting its flanks, and the wagons protected in the middle of the column. Behind, covering its rear and ensuring that no stragglers fell behind, came the rearguard led by Barbarossa himself.

The army, therefore, whilst divided into four divisions was split into effectively three detachments, with each making camp separately from the other, and able to defend itself when needed. Some distance existed between each of these detachments, but not so great that they could not provide mutual support if required. *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg* relates how in the second pass between Naissus and Serdica, the vanguard was held at bay by a 'great crowd of looters and robbers' who had blocked the road with rocks and wood.⁸⁶² Although the knights did 'great damage' to the defenders, they were obliged to wait until the third division, commanded by Duke Berthold of Merania, arrived to sweep away the remaining defenders and clear a path for the army to progress.

Given these gaps between each detachment it is difficult to estimate the total length of the subsequent crusader column, although it was surely longer in practice than the 28 kilometres calculated above, and likely appreciably greater than 30 kilometres. If this estimation of the disposition and speed of the crusader force as it marched is correct, then covering approximately 13 kilometres a day it definitely was the case that Barbarossa's force took three days to pass any one single point, as being effectively split into three separate detachments, which together constituted four divisions, it

⁸⁶² Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, p. 150.

would take the rearguard of the army over two days marching time to cover the necessary distance to reach its vanguard.

With this rate of march, the main force would have been required to halt at least once during the passage of the 25 kilometre long Succ Pass, and most likely made camp near the remains of Palanka, which is approximately 13 kilometres from the head of the pass near the modern town of Mirovo. This would have then allowed the baggage train a full day to negotiate the remaining ten or so kilometres of the pass as it enters the Maritsa Valley, which is also its most difficult section. With a Byzantine army known to be nearby, the crusader force was certainly in an extremely vulnerable position at this point. Barbarossa's vanguard would have been required to stay behind the slowly moving main column as it negotiated the pass, and then covered it from the rear as it traversed the Maritsa Valley. Barbarossa's subsequent late arrival, and the decision to order the vanguard to halt at Philippopolis, makes a great deal of sense in this context, and any detour taken by him through the Momina Klissura would surely only have increased the danger the main column was under at this point, not reduced it.

Certainly this is, as best, a simplistic depiction of Barbarossa's march, and many aspects of it warrant further detailed investigation. In particular the length of the column formed by the marching crusaders appears exceptional, although this may be because the logistical demands placed upon medieval armies have tended to be generally underemphasised. Yet it serves to highlight the extreme logistical pressures the force was subjected to. Ordinarily these would have been alleviated by splitting the army and having sections follow different routes, sending forces or baggage ahead or simply leaving it behind, but this was not an option for Barbarossa. Instead, he was required to keep the force together and as coherent as possible whilst ensuring it continued moving forwards. If the army had been even larger than the 15,000 men estimated here, and contained more than two hundred wagons, a not implausible scenario, then these issues would only have been further exacerbated.

An interesting comparison can be made between this example and the army Emperor Manuel Comnenus led against the Seljuk Turks in 1176, which was said to number in the '*tens of thousands*', and contained a siege train that was attended by large numbers of non-combatants.⁸⁶³ Haldon estimates the army numbered approximately 25,000 men, and was accompanied by a baggage train comprised of 3,000 wagons.⁸⁶⁴ In a letter to King Henry II of England, Manuel described how the army came to be ambushed at Myriokephalon, '*In consequence of the narrowness of the road and the difficulties of the passage, the army of our empire was extended in a line fully ten miles in length; and, inasmuch as who went first were unable to support those who came last, and again, on the other hand,*

⁸⁶³ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 100-1.

⁸⁶⁴ J. Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars* (Gloucestershire, 2008), p. 198.

*those who came last were unable to aid those who went before, it was no common misfortune that this distance lay between them. Indeed the troops that formed the van were divided by a very considerable interval from the main body of our army, having at last forgotten it altogether, and not waiting for its coming up.*⁸⁶⁵

This passage gives the impression that Manuel's army was ten miles long in total, and this large discrepancy between the physical sizes of the two armies, negotiating similar terrain, is hard to account for. One possible explanation is offered by Finlay, who argues that Manuel's army had become so distended along its march that the ten miles Manuel refers to, rather than the total length of the army, was the distance between each division, in that this was the length of the gap that had been allowed to open between the van and the main body of the army owing to the narrowness of the route, and the poor march discipline of its participants.⁸⁶⁶ Certainly this appears a far better explanation than the column being ten miles long in total, a scarcely believable figure given the numbers involved. If 3,000 wagons were indeed accompanying the army then these alone, progressing two abreast, would have formed a column approximately 15 kilometres long.⁸⁶⁷

This explanation also reflects how only part of Manuel's army was destroyed during the Seljuk ambush for, as Manuel himself explains, the other divisions were simply too far away to assist in the fighting. Allowing the vanguard to pass unmolested, before falling upon the centre of the column, was a common tactic for ambushers. The same ploy was used against an army commanded by Isaac Angelos during the summer of 1191, when it was ambushed in a narrow mountain pass. His army suffered a similar fate to that of Manuel's, when an ambushing force of Vlachs '*deemed it more advantageous to allow the first troops to proceed through without bloodshed and by outflanking both ends rise against the center.*'⁸⁶⁸

It was this exact scenario which Barbarossa sought to avoid, and comparing his experience with that of Manuel and Isaac raises two interesting points, the first being the importance of maintaining strict discipline on a march, as was enforced by Barbarossa, to ensure such gaps did not open up in the column and ensure that the army, even when necessarily split into separate divisions, was able to provide mutual support in event of ambush. The second is the ease with which logistical issues, and the terminology which depicts them, can potentially be a source of confusion for historians. The

⁸⁶⁵ Roger de Hoveden, *Annals of Roger de Hoveden: Comprising the history of England and of other countries of Europe from A.D. 732 to A.D. 1201. Vol. 1.* (London, 1853), p. 420-1.

⁸⁶⁶ G. Finlay, *History of the Byzantine and Greek Empires, Vol. 2* (London, 1854), p. 236.

⁸⁶⁷ Bachrach estimates that on similar roads, the 2,000 wagons that accompanied the First Crusade likely stretched out for some ten kilometres, 'The Crusader March from Dorylaion to Herakleia, 4 July –ca. 2 September 1097', p. 45.

⁸⁶⁸ Choniates, *Historia*, p. 236.

physical complexities involved in manoeuvring large numbers of men, along with their accompanying material, can be difficult to define explicitly, and the reports of those who participated in these events may reflect only their own experience of a certain section of the entire host.

Thus even the admittedly crude computations presented here still give some insight into the sorts of logistical pressures that the crusader host was required to confront, and these, by any calculation, must have been immense. Even if the force had departed from Branichevo with twenty days of provisions on hand, these would have not lasted long. Constant attrition of the baggage train, as well as the inability to resupply on the march, either along the Morava or Nishava Rivers, would have slowly depleted available reserves. The reports of disputes and robberies suggest that even the relatively prosperous city of Naissus struggled to meet the enormous demand, and it was likely not till the crusaders reached Philippopolis that the force was fully resupplied. If we take the crusaders' date of departure from Branichevo as July 9, when the lead elements set off, and its arrival at Philippopolis on August 24, it would have needed to be entirely resupplied at least twice whilst *en route*.

The demand for fodder in particular would have created insurmountable logistical pressures. The approximate twelve days it took for this force to negotiate the distance between Branichevo and Naissus, especially given that the sources suggest they were under constant attack during this period, would have placed enormous strain on its accompanying baggage train. Given the crusaders were almost certainly carrying no more than five days supply, insufficient green fodder would have required servants, as the sources note, to spend time cutting fresh grass away from the main army, and thus exposing them to ambush. How much grass was available in a heavy forested region like that of the Morava Valley is also an important consideration, and it can only be concluded that the accompanying animals must have suffered heavily through lack of fresh fodder whilst traversing this region, with the vital warhorses receiving preferential treatment at all times. Again, the journey along the Nishava River would have been little better in this regard.

Once available stocks had been exhausted, 15,000 participants (discounting non-combatants) would have required over 15 tonnes of grain per day, while 6,000 horses would equally require a little over 13 tonnes of dry fodder, and an additional 40 tonnes of green fodder, a day. Given that the pack animals would have required a further 40 tonnes of green fodder per day on top of this, it is extremely difficult to see where these supplies could possibly have been sourced. It is no surprise that the *Historia de Expeditione* relates the enormous relief experienced by the army, after the trial of spending

'six weeks in Bulgaria', when it finally entered the Maritsa Valley, where 'through Divine grace the thirsty army found water and all of its wants were relieved.'⁸⁶⁹

It is in this context that Isaac Angelos' attempts to throw the crusaders advance into confusion, at least in theory, appear to have some merit. Each extra day the crusaders spent on the march compounded the logistical pressures they faced. That Isaac attempted to prohibit their entrance into the Maritsa Valley by blockading the Succi Pass confirms that he sought to deny them access to, by now, desperately needed provisions. This was by far the most advantageous location in which to confront the crusaders, and in addition to exposing it to ambush, time spent trapped in this mountain pass would have wreaked a terrible toll upon its baggage and supply trains, deprived of both fresh fodder and adequate water supplies. Meanwhile the army stationed nearby, under the command of the *protostrator* Manuel Kamytzes, was under instruction to attack foraging parties, limiting its ability to relieve the almost crippling stress the crusader force must have been under. This course of action fits with those strategies well chronicled within Byzantine *Taktika*, which argued that instead of risky direct confrontation with an enemy, it should instead be delayed until it could no longer stay in the field, misled with false information about Byzantine intentions, and potential sources of provisions should be denied.⁸⁷⁰

In this, therefore, Isaac was following a long established Byzantine tradition of using logistical pressure as a means by which to reduce crusaders, or indeed any perceived foe, to either a state of compliance, or limit the harm they could inflict.⁸⁷¹ During the passage of the First and Second Crusades the Byzantines had employed military measures to ensure that the crusaders were kept moving, partly to prevent excessive pillaging, but also in order to keep them from uniting into one host that would prove too difficult to control. Alexius Comnenus took careful precautions to ensure that the participants of the First Crusade were kept divided along their march to the capital, profiting greatly from the use of Pechenegs to this end, and also did not hesitate to cut off deliveries of supplies when leaders proved hesitant to accept his offered gifts, along with their attached oaths. Likewise Manuel Comnenus employed military force to compel the Germans of the Second Crusade to not tarry overlong in any one place on their march, dispatching an army under the Turkish general Prosouch that followed the Germans for some time to counter excessive looting, and then drove them out of Adrianople.⁸⁷²

⁸⁶⁹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 68-9.

⁸⁷⁰ Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, p. 37.

⁸⁷¹ For more on this approach see Shepard, 'Information, disinformation and delay in Byzantine diplomacy', also J. Haldon, 'Blood and Ink: some observations on Byzantine attitudes towards warfare and diplomacy', in J. Shepard & S. Franklin eds., *Byzantine Diplomacy: papers from the Twenty-fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Cambridge, March 1990* (Aldershot, 1992).

⁸⁷² Kinnamos, *The Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus*, p. 61.

Isaac's plan, as originally conceived, was for Philippopolis to hold out against the crusaders, and for this reason he instructed Choniates to repair its walls. At some point, however, Isaac changed his mind, perhaps on account of the suspect loyalties of the city's 'Manichean' community. Choniates, now instructed to raze the walls, was seemingly surprised by the advance of the crusaders and fled, leaving the city, with its fortifications and supplies, in their hands. From here Byzantine resistance rapidly collapsed. The inability of the Byzantines to prevent the crusaders from freely pillaging the surrounding landscape was underlined by the military defeat suffered on November 22, 1189, when an attempted ambush on a crusader supply train near the fortress of Prousenos turned instead into a complete rout.⁸⁷³ The ill-disciplined Byzantine forces were no match for the crusaders, and further cities, such as Adrianople and Arcadiopolis, were similarly abandoned.

That Isaac's approach failed so utterly can partly be explained through the upheavals experienced throughout the empire in the period immediately preceding the crusaders' arrival, and Isaac's error was in not appreciating that the empire no longer possessed the military might with which to intimidate a potential or perceived foe like Barbarossa into submission. The massacre of 1182 robbed the empire of the services of western mercenaries, although the 'Alans' subsequently employed performed admirably in clashes with Barbarossa's crusaders.⁸⁷⁴ Similarly the number of Turkish mercenaries appears to have sharply declined after the disaster at Myriokephalon in 1176, likely because service in Byzantine employ ceased to be viewed as either profitable or desirable, whilst an anti-Turkish element in Constantinople quickly achieved prominence after Manuel's death in 1180.⁸⁷⁵

Meanwhile the highly contentious reign of Andronicus Comnenus had only served to widen the divisions that existed between the state and the powerful landed nobility. The Angeloi, far from the only powerful dynasty seeking to seize control over the empire, were in desperate need of strong alliances. This set in motion the train of events that led to Isaac's marriage to the eldest daughter of King Béla III of Hungary, and the subsequent Bulgar uprising of 1185. Fearful that the Serbs or Bulgars would seek to profit from the confusion created by Barbarossa's passage to further their own ambitions, Isaac's disjointed response to the crisis, especially the conflicting instructions he gave to Nicetas Choniates in regards to the defence of Philippopolis, serves to highlight the insecurity of his own position.

⁸⁷³ Nicetas Choniates, *Historia*, p. 224-5.

⁸⁷⁴ Nicetas Choniates, *Historia*, p. 225.

⁸⁷⁵ On the divisions which hamstrung the Byzantine court see in particular, C. Brand, 'The Turkish element in Byzantium, eleventh – twelfth centuries', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 43 (1989), p. 25., and also, A. Kazhdan, 'Latins and Franks in Byzantium: Perception and reality from the eleventh to the twelfth century', in A. E. Laiou & R. P. Mottahedeh eds., *The Crusades from the perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim world* (Washington D.C., 2001).

It is also important to not overestimate Byzantine reach in this period either. Whilst Isaac sought to delay the crusaders passage through the mountain passes, it does not necessarily follow that he had been conspiring against the crusaders from the outset. Crusader accusations of Byzantine duplicity were not unfounded, as deception formed a cornerstone of Byzantine strategic approaches to such scenarios, but most of the hardships endured by the crusaders between the Danube and Serdica were likely the consequence of political instability and constant war in the region, rather than the direct machinations of a distant Byzantine emperor.⁸⁷⁶ On the contrary, the conditions endured by the crusaders highlight the limited reach of Byzantine authority over this region at that time, when a hostile force occupied Naissus, and even Philippopolis was determined to be untenable in the face of anticipated crusader aggression. Indeed, such an episode highlights the practical limitations that hindered the enforcement of Byzantine authority in the Balkans. Distances were too vast, and communication lines too precarious, to allow for the establishment of efficient administration over regions far removed from the capital when the state itself was weak.

In consequence, as opposed to negotiating from the position of strength he had hoped to hold, Isaac was instead reduced to suing for peace from a position of abject weakness. Rather than receiving the binding oaths of goodwill and cooperation that he doubtlessly wished to extract from a starving and dispirited crusader host, the only strength that remained to the Byzantines were the walls of Constantinople itself, which protected them at least from direct assault, and with its final bargaining chip being possession of the vessels required to transport the crusader army across the straits. Bereft of further options, his only choice was to yield to the crusaders demands.

The terms of the subsequent Treaty of Adrianople, agreed February 14, 1190, read more like the capitulation of a defeated foe than an agreement between equal parties. Byzantine arms had singularly failed to deny the crusaders possession of vital centres, and the only attempts to confront the crusaders directly, in the Succi Pass and again at Prousenos, had ended in fiasco. And yet, despite having the bounty of the Maritsa Valley and Thrace, and the stores of Philippopolis and Adrianople, within his grasp, Barbarossa would have found the logistical pressures still facing his force exacting. Even once the crusaders had secured Philippopolis, and the large stores of food held there, parties ranged far and wide, from Beroe in the north, and Gornoslav to the south. These raids secured large stores of loot, but obtaining further supplies was likely their primary aim.⁸⁷⁷ *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, for instance, complains about the stench of the countless bodies that littered

⁸⁷⁶ On this point also see Eickhoff, *Friedrich Barbarossa im Orient*, p. 60-4.

⁸⁷⁷ On the sites subjected to attack by the Germans see in particular M. Hendy, 'The Gornoslav hoard, the Emperor Frederick I, and the Monastery of Bachkovo', in M. Hendy ed., *The economy, fiscal administration and coinage of Byzantium* (Northampton, 1989), p. 180-5.

Philippopolis a month after its seizure by the crusaders.⁸⁷⁸ Since the city had been taken without issue these were likely the remains of the 'poor' who had stayed behind, and had subsequently starved to death during its occupation, indicating that supplies of food, even with the assistance of local Armenians and Bulgarians, was still a serious concern. The decision to split the force between Philippopolis and Adrianople was undoubtedly taken to ease logistical pressures.

Moreover, a breakdown in crusader discipline associated with widespread pillaging would have been a worrying development considering the arduous crossing of Anatolia that was still to come. The *Historia de Expeditione* describes how the army was 'overflowing with booty taken from these Greek enemies, and since luxuries were available in abundance and many of the army remained idle for a long time this served to encourage bad behaviour among them' and that as a consequence, 'whereas good faith and concord had formerly flourished in the army of Christ, they now disappeared among many as avarice and its daughter envy flourished.'⁸⁷⁹ For Barbarossa, who well knew the hardships the crossing of Asia Minor would entail, developments such as these would have been extremely disturbing.

A rapprochement was therefore highly desirable to both sides; with winter nearing its end Barbarossa would naturally have been eager to press on, whilst in light of the failure of his attempts to extract oaths from the crusader leadership, and reassured by his advisors that Barbarossa did not seek the capital for himself, Isaac was by now happy to agree to any terms that would rid him of this menace, however humiliating they may have been.

In hindsight Barbarossa's force weathered the demands of the long and arduous trek across the Balkans with remarkable success. The logistical strains placed upon the crusaders were, as can be seen, immense. After available food reserves had been exhausted little possibility for resupply existed, with even Naissus arguably lacking the means to resupply the entire force. After the slow and difficult march south from the Danube, the journey between Naissus and Serdica likewise would have offered little to no opportunity to obtain supplies. The crusaders would therefore have been reduced to foraging whilst under constant threat of ambush. Procuring the enormous amounts of food and fodder required would have been an enormously difficult proposition, and one that was likely not alleviated until the army finally was able to enter the Maritsa Valley.

Barbarossa's primary error was in over-estimating the ability, or even the willingness, of Byzantium to supply his force. Likely fuelled by false expectations drawn from his experience during the Second Crusade, and the promises of Byzantine envoys, Barbarossa appears to have believed that a majority

⁸⁷⁸ Magnus of Reichersberg, *The Chronicle of Magnus of Reichersberg*, p. 153.

⁸⁷⁹ *Historia de Expeditione Friderici Imperatoris*, p. 86.

of the necessary provisions would be available to purchase *en route*. When this proved not to be the case, acrimony between the crusaders and the Byzantines festered and ultimately broke out into outright conflict. The poverty of Serdica in particular, where the crusaders had expected to purchase much needed supplies after the gruelling journey from Naissus, as had been the case during the Second Crusade, came as a cruel surprise. Worse was the fact that the crusaders were required to transport the vast sums of money they had been obliged to bring with them. This, and the teams of oxen who were required to haul the heavy wagons, represented a serious burden to the army, slowing its progress dramatically. Akin to Napoleon's disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812, the elaborate logistical preparations undertaken beforehand ultimately served only to hinder the crusaders progress.

For Barbarossa's army, though, the ultimate disaster was reserved for Asia Minor and, despite the numerous difficulties encountered, it appears to have weathered the arduous passage of the Balkans remarkably well. For this surely the leadership offered by Barbarossa, as well as the experience of the soldiers involved, played an important role in ensuring the crusade remained a cohesive force, and that Byzantine attempts to hinder their progress ultimately came to naught.

Chapter 13: Conclusion

In his book, *How to lie with maps*, Mark Monmonier describes how map makers must offer a selective, incomplete view of reality, and that to present a useful and truthful picture, even accurate maps must contain white lies.⁸⁸⁰ The difficulties associated with creating maps, and their interpretation, are well known, but have perhaps not been adequately acknowledged when it comes to a subject such as the road networks of the Middle Ages. Here the well-meaning desire to present information to the reader in the most accessible fashion possible has resulted in maps of broad scales, and with selective features conspicuously highlighted. The historian of the medieval Balkans is therefore presented with maps that are, at best, abstractions of the road network of this region, or at worst contain outright, if inadvertent, falsehoods.

This thesis has aimed to explore this issue through the study of the history of the medieval Balkans in respect to its single most prominent land route, the Roman military road that connected Constantinople with the middle Danube. For the Byzantine Empire the *Via Militaris* formed the linchpin of their strategic approach towards the Central Balkans. For a state, such as Byzantium, that was required to continuously guard extensive frontiers located, in both the east and west, at enormously long distances from the capital, geographic space itself became an important, perhaps even a key, element in strategic planning, and a significant contributing factor in the long survival of the state itself despite the constant threat of invasion on multiple fronts. Rather than guard the entire front, a proposition beyond their limited means, the unique geography of the Balkans was utilised to establish buffer zones and establish control over key strategic sites which afforded access to the rich interior. These strategic sites, it is argued, all shared the common traits of prominent locations on the *Via Militaris* and extensive fortifications dating to the rule of Justinian.

After the tumultuous seventh and eighth centuries much of the road surface undeniably experienced a long period of neglect and decay. In particular those sections of the route through mountain passes or along narrow river valleys, which represented tempting locations for ambushes and would furthermore have been rendered difficult or impassable by poor weather, would have proven prohibitively difficult to negotiate. Yet the sources demonstrate that large crusader armies were still able to travel over this road, even if their progress was slow or difficult.

⁸⁸⁰ M. Monmonier, *How to lie with maps* (Chicago, 1996), p. 1.

This was likely the result of three factors, the first being the size of the cities along the route and presence of local communities who could be pressed through *corvée* to repair dilapidated sections of the road. This work, whilst necessarily abandoning the smooth paved surface of the original Roman road, would have been able to render their formidable beds navigable, if only for the immediate future. The second is, after the reconquest of the region by Emperor Basil II, the establishment of military governors along the route who were responsible for the maintenance of roads within their jurisdiction, and could guide the necessary work. The third factor is that the terrain the road traversed never reached gradients so steep as to require stepping, or at least steps placed so far apart that wheeled vehicles could still adequately negotiate them. As has been shown, the geographical obstacles the route encompassed are not as difficult as might be expected, and despite the fact that the mountains of the region gave the Balkans its name, the *Via Militaris* was most definitely not a mountain road. A more detailed analysis of the topography of the road proves that, in comparison to the more mountainous *Via Egnatia*, gradients along the *Via Militaris* were never so high as to prohibit the use of heavy four-wheeled wagons, which undoubtedly played a role in the route's prominence during the Second and Third Crusades.

However, where this study has failed to provide clear evidence is in regards to the use of alternate routes, and confusion over this issue renders the idea that the *Via Militaris* constituted one single road in the Middle Ages almost certainly a vast oversimplification. Numerous alternate, or secondary, roads dating from the Roman period existed, and which were preferred at any given point in time is extremely difficult to ascertain given the lack of geographical detail within existing literary sources. It is possible that many such routes were in use at once, with travellers and armies choosing between them based on differing local conditions. Analysis of the passage of the Third Crusade in particular gives rise to numerous such occasions where it is difficult to establish exactly where the road the crusaders were travelling on lay.

There is nevertheless encountered within modern literature an erroneous sense that the identity of the medieval *Via Militaris* is now largely 'known', that between the history of Jireček and modern compilations such as the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, the *Via Militaris* has been comprehensively mapped. This thesis sharply opposes this view, and argues instead that, owing to the inherent static nature of those depictions, the medieval *Via Militaris* remains a largely nebulous concept, almost impossible to differentiate from the Roman and Ottoman roads, and therefore subject to the broadest of assumptions. The manifold variations which exist in contemporary depictions of the route adequately portrays the confusion which now surrounds these roads.

This has today led to a scenario in which the medieval *Via Militaris* possesses no clear identity. The Roman history of the road is much celebrated, and in 2010 the ‘*Roman Emperor’s Road*’ tourist project was unveiled, a series of linked itineraries that explore the Roman history of Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania. The Serbian itinerary, called the *Itinerarium Romanum Serbiae*, has already been launched, and showcases numerous sites located on or near to the route of the *Via Militaris*, such as ancient Viminacium and Naissus, although the itinerary does not attempt to follow the route of the *Via Militaris* as such (Figure 92). No such attention is given to the medieval identity of the road, even though many of these sites also possess long and rich histories in the Middle Ages. The lack of recognition accorded to the medieval road is curious, especially given its prominence as a route for pilgrims and crusaders alike.



Figure 92: Map of locations visited by the *Itinerarium Romanum Serbia*. From <http://viminacium.org.rs/en/projekti/itinerarium-romanum-serbiae/>

Therefore this thesis, whilst unable to present definitive evidence of the exact route of the medieval *Via Militaris* across its entire length, has at least been able to highlight the inadequacies of existing depictions of the road. Those depictions which exist in historical atlases, or the maps that often accompany contemporary texts on the region, are typically delivered at so large a scale that they portray a highly ambiguous representation of the route of the road, and almost always provide no clear picture of the exact position of the road bed, only the general region through which it is believed to have travelled. This is further compounded by topographical data that is similarly either completely absent or at so large a scale that distinctive features, such as the Nishava Valley or the Succi Pass, are

lost entirely. Moreover, these representations are highly reliant on evidence pertaining to the road's Late Antique condition, and the occasionally flawed conclusions reached by Konstantin Jireček. No clear depiction has therefore emerged of the road's identity during the medieval period, of either its width, the quality of its surface, the choice of route, or even more generally the importance with which it was regarded by the Byzantine state.

A better understanding of such issues would allow for more detailed analysis of the broad scope of Byzantine strategy, particularly in regards to such traumatic events as the passage of large crusader forces. Such hordes placed extraordinary demands upon their Byzantine hosts, and the oft repeated complaint that the locals were not as forthcoming with market services as had been expected would be better understood if we could conceive of the ability, or otherwise, of Byzantium to actually meet their needs. Could the Byzantines freely move foodstuffs along the *Via Militaris* in order to create necessary stockpiles? The sources indicate they could, such as at Serdica during the passage of the Second Crusade, but the effort required, and the organisational mechanics which underpinned such labours, are mostly unknown to us.

Yet even at a local level the route of the road can provide important information for historians, in particular in regards to the decisions made by leaders of armies who used it, and those who sought to deny them passage along it. Isaac Angelos' attempt to deny the participants of the Third Crusade easy entry into the Maritsa Valley looks, in hindsight, utterly and hopelessly flawed if an alternate route, as suggested by Choniates, was left entirely unguarded. If this was indeed the case it also raises important considerations as to the level of intelligence available to Byzantine decision makers. Was it the case that foreign invaders, guided by local sympathisers, were better informed of local roads and road conditions than the Byzantines were themselves?

The example of the general Comentiolus, and his attempt to negotiate the 'Track of Trajan', indicates how even along formerly important routes intelligence could be entirely lacking, and Byzantine armies were instead reliant on the employment of local guides. Such examples prove how local knowledge, even along a route as well known as the *Via Militaris*, remained important, and that Byzantine generals were in need of information on local conditions or available alternate routes. It is not surprising that Byzantine *Taktika* place such a heavy emphasis on the use of guides and intelligence gathering whilst in the field, not only to track movement of the enemy but also to scout the condition of the road ahead, as without this aid generals were effectively operating blind.

Such uncertainties over the route find little expression within existing depictions of the 'Byzantine' Balkans, which tend to carry with them very broad assumptions. Borders are often placed somewhat arbitrarily, and the area they encompass is generally regarded to be both subservient to Byzantine

authority, and to assume a largely orthodox identity, with the roads that link each location prominently marked, as if their route, quality, or even existence, was an accepted geographical fact. The example of Philippopolis, a major strategic city located at no more than two or three weeks march from the capital, along what surely were the best preserved and maintained roads in the region, yet which also played host to a sizeable heretical community who appears to have shown nothing but contempt for Byzantine authority, shows the limitations of such representations. If the loyalty of the populace of Philippopolis was uncertain, then what could be said for more distant cities such as Serdica and Naissus? Depictions of the medieval *Via Militaris* as one long, static, unbroken stretch of road along which travel occurred frictionlessly, or at such a scale that local details are completely drowned out, fails to afford due recognition of these issues.

Historians are able to inform themselves of such geographical details through use of compendiums such as the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, but this does little to avail them of debates over the actual route at a local level in the Middle Ages. What exists instead is a bewildering array of locations and a confusion of possible routes, and in this respect Fine's complaint that the geography of the Balkans is endlessly complicated, and the multitude of place names almost impossible for a non-specialist to remember, is actually a quite valid one. But this does not mean that the attempt should not be made, and certainly a great deal more could be done in terms of representing the historical geography of this region in a manner that is more accessible to the non-specialist. Better quality maps, at more comprehensive scales, and the use of online cartographic resources, are just two ways in which this information could be better presented to the reader. And in doing so it allows a more thorough analysis of the medieval geographical context to be approached.

What is required therefore are clear concise depictions of the route of the *Via Militaris* as it existed in the medieval period, including what possible alternatives were available, as well as detailed examinations of the quality of its surface. Existing depictions in the *TIB* series offer a great deal of promise in this regard, but are constrained by the paucity of published archaeological remains along much of its route, and given the slow pace of progress in archaeological excavations there is no promise of a more detailed analysis emerging in the near future. However even low level field research can make an important contribution to our understanding of the medieval *Via Militaris*. This thesis has demonstrated that large tracts of unexplored road surface along its route remain, in particular near the modern Serbian-Bulgarian border and in the Succi Pass, and Dr Mitko Madzharov furthermore makes mention of numerous additional examples, which the author was unfortunately unable to locate in the field, north of the Maritsa River between modern Plovdiv and Edirne. It has also demonstrated how a more focused study of the topography of the route can enhance our understanding of the strategic importance of the road, and in particular in this instance of its ability

to accommodate wheeled vehicles during the crusading period. A more comprehensive survey of these, and other remains, would be of great benefit to historians of this region, and would also greatly assist in the compilation of web-based gazetteers such as the Pleiades Project. That the sections of surviving road surface detailed within this thesis, especially those within the Succ Pass, have not been the subject of even preliminary archaeological investigations, indicates just how much more can be done in studying the route at a local level and if nothing else these, and other remains along the route of the *Via Militaris*, deserve to be brought to the attention of the wider academic community.

Individual study of a topic as broad as this, such as this thesis represents, is bound to encounter more questions than can possibly be answered. Group projects such as Medieval Warfare on the Grid (MWGrid) therefore also appear to offer a way forward, in that by bringing a multi-divisional collaborative approach to the subject some of the issues associated with analysis of archaeological or literary evidence alone can be alleviated.⁸⁸¹ Analysis of geographical data and the employment of predictive modelling, such as routes of least-cost, when allied with known archaeological remains, offers an opportunity to greatly enhance our understanding of medieval logistical networks, particularly in areas which are poorly covered by existing sources. Recent developments in this direction, and in particular by the *TIB* series and historians such as Mihailo Popović and Johannes Koder, suggest that in the near future the historical geography of the medieval Balkans may be able to be presented in far greater detail than has ever before been possible. It is on this topic that greater cross-disciplinary attention is therefore required if the medieval *Via Militaris* as a dynamic entity with a living history, as opposed to a linear line traversing empty space, is ever to be adequately explored. As Popović notes, these approaches would not be unfamiliar to geographers or even many archaeologists, but remain relatively unutilised by historians.⁸⁸²

GIS tools cannot by themselves provide answers however, and they ought not to be treated as a panacea for all of the issues pertaining to the study of medieval roads that have been raised here. In particular they are only ever as good as the data that they are provided with, and further research into establishing the underlying geographical context in the medieval period is therefore required, especially in defining such parameters as availability of water, and agricultural practices and their variation over space. Landscape archaeology, in particular the examination of chronological patterns of settlement and land use, would be of enormous benefit in determining how medieval communities interacted with the physical landscape that the *Via Militaris* negotiated. Currently we know little of

⁸⁸¹ Medieval Warfare on the Grid, <http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/research/projects/mwgrid/> (accessed, 22/1/2016).

⁸⁸² Popović, 'Moving through Medieval Macedonia; late modern cartography, archive material, and hydrographic data used for the regressive modelling of transportation networks', p. 165.

such questions, and so whilst logistical planning was at the forefront of both the crusaders passage across the Balkans, and the Byzantines response to it, we have very little by the way of context, beyond anecdotal evidence, with which to actually measure such important variables as access to water or dry fodder.

As this thesis has argued, the most immediate benefit from such an approach could be found in the field of medieval military logistics. The passage of the German contingent of the Third Crusade along the *Via Militaris* represents one such example where some of those questions which the literary record gives rise to, such as the curious delay before entering an abandoned Philippopolis, or the bizarre attitude of the Byzantine Emperor Isaac Angelos, might find explanation through detailed logistical modelling. It is hoped that even the simple example offered here serves to highlight the benefits such an approach can offer, not to just analysis of the crusading period, but the upheavals of earlier centuries as well.

The challenge is how to present all of this information in a manner that is both accessible and understandable to the non-specialist, and to raise study of the *Via Militaris*, or indeed medieval logistical networks in general, beyond the realm of specialist discourses. This is a difficult issue to solve, and cannot simply be answered by arguing for 'better maps' alone. Maps are unavoidably static, and whilst web-based gazetteers have dramatically increased the scope of information that is readily available to the non-specialist, there remains the problem of scale, of determining the routes of roads at the local level, but also of context: what routes were used at any specific point at time, and why? Without a better appreciation of the manner in which routes interacted with the surrounding landscape, and the physical quality of the roads themselves, all that remains is a confusing mass of possible roads and destinations. As Jireček himself argued, it is imperative to consider these routes within the broader historical context, and in this sense it is not enough to even study the *Via Militaris* alone, but instead how it connected into a wider matrix of roads and routes, including the *Via Egnatia*, and the secondary roads which linked the two. Only through a consideration of the greater geographical setting can the importance of routes, and their alternatives, be conceived.

This thesis has therefore attempted to analyse the *Via Militaris* in terms of the Braudelian *longue durée*, and has shown that although the physical road of the late twelfth century was demonstrably different to that of the Late Antique period, it served remarkably similar purposes. Manuel Comnenus occupied the city of Naissus in 1162 for the same reasons that the *Augustus* Julian had occupied it in 361, in that it commanded control over all the major roads of the Central Balkans, and its fertile environs allowed it to accommodate the needs of even large armies for prolonged periods of time. In the twelfth century Byzantium allowed the 'Bulgarian Forest' to engulf the road along Morava River

for the same reasons the Serbians did in the nineteenth century, for it checked the advance of hostile, or potentially hostile, armies. Similarly the Byzantines fortified and blockaded the Succi Pass against the passage of the Third Crusade in 1189 in the same manner that the Romans had attempted to hold back the Hunish invasion of Thrace in the mid-fifth century, or the Goths in the fourth. The agricultural wealth of Philippopolis delighted fifth century historians as much as it did hungry twelfth century crusaders. And at the end of the road lay the imperial capital, Constantinople, the largest and most influential city in the European medieval world.

These similarities exist because the underlying geographical context, whether in the Late Antique or medieval eras, was fundamentally equivalent. The human geography of those regions encompassed by the *Via Militaris* had been sharply altered over time by war, plague and migration, but the importance of the *Via Militaris* was derived primarily from the landscape it negotiated. It followed the major river systems, linked the largest cities which occupy the most fertile land, and crossed the mountains through the most convenient pass in the entirety of the Central Balkans. These are not incidental details, and any study of the route ought to hold its geographical setting as the foremost factor in the road's operation, function, and subsequent prominence. The physical appearance of the road changed over time as a reflection of the comparative resources of those who commanded control over it, yet it still remained the single most important route via which imperial authority could be projected over the Central Balkans, and it was, especially from the eleventh century onwards, likewise the single most accessible road via which those wishing to travel both east and west through this region might do so.

The *Via Militaris*, therefore, was perfectly positioned to exert a powerful influence on the development of the Balkan region. Navigating the most accessible terrain, linking its most populous cities with the imperial capital, and it in turn with Northern Italy and Central Europe, the road was bound to play a defining role in those issues that shaped the history of this region. For the early Europeans who followed the course of the river systems inland towards the middle Danube, the crusaders travelling in the opposite direction towards the distant Holy Land, or the Ottomans in their campaigns towards Central Europe and the gates of Vienna, the road, or the route it would one day come to encompass, played a crucial role. Its route shaped the physical dimensions of human interaction across the entire region, from trade and settlement, the spread of religion and heresy, to war and defence. Even the refugee crisis that overwhelmed Europe in the summer of 2015 can be analysed in terms of this route through the Balkans, and the role it has historically played as a conduit for the movement of people between East and West. To understand the route, and the mechanics of movement across it, is to therefore achieve insight into not only how the identity of the Balkans was forged, but is still being shaped today.

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