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A Neglected Note to the Naval Defense of Constantinople during the Avar Siege: the Position of σκαφοκάραβοι in the Golden Horn

In one of my previous studies I tried to highlight one hitherto scarcely debated episode from the Avar siege of Constantinople in 626.¹ It was the attempt of the Avar khagan to launch Slavic monoxyla (dug-out canoes) into the waters of the Golden Horn on August 1.² We know that the khagan managed to launch the canoes into the water under the St. Callinicus Bridge, which has been until recently wrongly placed by the historians on the edge of the Golden Horn.³ At present, there is no doubt that this bridge and its homonymous church stood much closer to the city, about a kilometre from the Blachernae, close to the Church of the Cosmas and Damian (see Map 1).⁴ The Chronicon Paschale

¹ Hurbanič, M., A Topographical Note Concerning the Avar Siege of Constantinople: the Question of the Localization of St. Callinicus Bridge. Byzantinoslavica 70 (2012) 1–2 15–24. The research for this paper was financially supported by VEGA 1/0427/14. The finalisation of this paper was supported by internal grant of the Faculty of Philosophy of Comenius University (Bratislava) n. FG13/2015, ŠPP O-15-105/0013-00. In this regard, I would like to thank my friend and colleague dr. Vratislav Zervan for his valuable comments on this topic and Zuzana Černáková, M.A., who took up the task of revising the text for the present publication.


⁴ The church of St. Callinicus was named in honor of the Christian martyr and saint Callinicus of
explicitly states that the Byzantine ships stayed *within sight* (εἰς ὄψιν) of the *monoxyla*, meaning that the Slavic boats and the mentioned bridge had to be significantly closer to the city ramparts than previously assumed.5

After the monoxyla assumed their positions at the St. Callinicus Bridge, the captains of the Roman ships could only patrol the Golden Horn. The defense at this place relied upon the *skafokaraboi* that were part of the City’s navy.6

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5 In this regard, see Hurbanič (n. 1).

6 The translators of the *Chronicon paschale* translated this term as cutters, i. e. a light, fast coastal patrol boats. Cf. Whitby, Mich. – Whitby, Mar. (trans.) *Chronicon Paschale* 284–628 AD. Liverpool 1989. 174. In this regard see Lampe, G. W. H., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Oxford 1961. 1236 (a light man-of-war); cf. also Howard-Johnston (n. 2) 135. n. 15. (“a special type of manoeuvrable boat designed to combat the *monoxyla* in the enclosed waters of the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus.”). According to C. Zuckerman, *skafokaraboi* were probably commercial sailboats rather than specialized battleships that could also be maneuvered by oars. Cf. Zuckerman, C. Learning from the Enemy and More: Studies in Dark Centuries Byzantium. *Millennium* 2 (2005) 113. This may be possible, but there is no proof in the sources. The technical term *σκαφοκάραβοι* is only mentioned by the author of the *Chronicon Paschale* in connection with the Avar siege of Constantinople. The later patriarch Nicephorus has instead the διήρεις μὲν καὶ τριήρεις. Cf. Zuckerman, C. Learning from the Enemy and More: Studies in Dark Centuries Byzantium. *Millennium* 2 (2005) 113. This may be possible, but there is no proof in the sources. The technical term *σκαφοκάραβοι* is only mentioned by the author of the *Chronicon Paschale* in connection with the Avar siege of Constantinople. The later patriarch Nicephorus has instead the διήρεις μὲν καὶ τριήρεις. Cf. Nicephorus (n. 4, c. 13; 58,27) The very term *σκαφοκάραβος* (σκαφοκάραβοι in its plural form) is in fact a compound consisting of the two Greek nouns – τὸ σκάφος and ὁ κάραβος. The first of these denotes a small ship or ship in generally meaning. The second one originally means a small boat (in this regard cf. *Pratum Spirituale* 76 [John Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale*. PG 87c. 2929C]). Cf. also Κουκουλές, Φ. Ι., ‘Έκ τοῦ ναυτικοῦ βιοῦ τῶν Βυζαντινών. EEBS 21 (1951) 24 (κάραβος); KAHANE, H. – KAHANE, R. – TIEZTE, A., *The lingua franca in the Levant. Turkish Nautical Terms of Italian and Greek Origin*. Urbana 1958. 780. (519 καράβι); 844. (573–574 σκάφη); HYRKÄNEN, J. – SALONEN, E., Über die Herkunft des slawischen *KORABJb*, griechischen Karabos/Karabion. *Studia Orientalia* 51 (1981) 3–7. The κάραβοι were, however, qualified as warships (διήρεις) in later Aphrodite papyri (c. 709 – 715/16). See PRYOR, J. H., From Dromon to Galea: Mediterranean
The official report on the siege in the *Chronicon Paschale* stresses the fact that these ships *remained* in place to prevent an intrusion of the *monoxyla*. This would indicate that there had been no moves before. This is an important mention, which I will attempt to clarify herein. Fortunately, we know exactly where the Constantinople ships were located. According to the *Chronicon Paschale*, they were stretched along the Golden Horn from the Church of St. Nicholas to the Church of St. Conon. It is safely established that the first these was located in the Blachernae on the bank of Golden Horn. This church would be later protected by a wall built by the Byzantine Emperor Leon V against the threat of attack of the Bulgarian Khan Krum in 813. However, at the time of the Avar siege, the Church of St. Nicholas was located in front of the Blachernae walls. The *Chronicon Paschale* states that during the decisive attack on the Blachernae on the final day of the Avar siege, the Armenian troops crossed the Blachernae wall and set fire to the adjacent colonnade in the vicinity of this church.

The other end of the naval defense was delimited by Church of St. Conon, which was, according to *Chronicon Paschale*, located in the Pegae. This region stretched on the northern shore of the Golden Horn between the quarter *ta Armamentareas* and *ta Galatu* and according to several authors, it should correspond to today's district of Kâşımpaşa in Istanbul.

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7 Janin (n. 4) 369–370.
10 *Chronicon Paschale* 724,11–12.
The Syrian chronicler John Malalas states that the Church of St. Conon stood in the Sycae, i.e. XIIIth region of Constantinople – today’s Galata in Istanbul. We learn in other sources that the Church of St. Laurence was located on the opposite southern shore of the gulf. Its location in the district called Pulcherianae is specified in numerous sources. Based on this information we can assume that the Church of St. Conon was likely to be located somewhere on the boundary of the Constantinople districts of Pegae and Sycae near the Golden Horn.

The Map 2 suggests that the defending ships created a sort of stretched chain. In this configuration, they filled a relatively large part of the Golden Horn. This position must have had a hidden meaning – if the patrols only wanted to prevent the Slavic boats to sail the gulf towards the city, it would have sufficed to cover the area in a perpendicular direction from north to south. Let us try to uncover this mystery. The positioning of the ships south of Church of St. Nicholas seems clear – the Blachernae wall is located right behind it and it prevented the enemy from entering Constantinople by land.

The ships had to guard this position thoroughly to prevent the Slavs from circumnavigating the wall. On the other hand, we know that the Church of St. Conon was a part of the Sycae. This area is mentioned as a part of Constantinople as early as in 425. A little later, Emperor Justinian promoted Sycae to a separate city and encircled it with a wall. We do not know of any prior fortifications – if there had been any, certainly not before 425. However, the report in the Chronicon Paschale suggests that Justinian only restored the walls and did not build new ones, so it is possible that the walls were built after

13 JANIN (n. 4) 283–284. Vita Basilii mentions that this emperor restored the temple of Martyr Laurence in Pulcherianae. It is expressly mentioned that the temple was in ruins at that time. Vita Basilii 93 (n. 4) 304,22–23.
14 This fact is obvious from the report in the Chronicon Paschale (724,11–12), in which the wall is located near the church of St. Nicholas. This report is also in contradiction with the recent opinion of Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger who says that the Blachernae Quarter was not protected by a land wall during the Avar attack. In this regard, see Asutay–Effenberger, N., Die Landmauer von Konstantinopel-Istanbul. Historisch-topografische und baugesichtliche Untersuchungen. Berlin – New York 2007. 14; 23–27. I plan to address this issue in greater detail in a separate study.
15 Ioannes Malalas 315,66 and 360,49.
16 Chronicon Paschale 618,14–19.
17 The walls of the Sycae suburbs are not mentioned in the inventory of Constantinople districts from the first half of the 5th century. See Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae, ed. O. SEECK, Berlin 1876. 240 (regio Sycae).
425 and restored in 527. The possible cause of this restoration was perhaps the attack of the rebellious general Vitalian on Constantinople in 515. Vitalian attempted to occupy the imperial metropolis through the Golden Horn, but the then emperor Anastasius won the naval battle, mainly thanks to the use of a combustible mixture that was a predecessor of the Greek fire.\(^{18}\) In any case, Sycae was a densely populated area already at the beginning of the 5th century and by the number of houses it ranked fifth among the fourteen known city districts.\(^{19}\) It is possible that Justinian’s successors reinforced these fortifications. Indications thereof are found in a later report, according to which Emperor Maurice built a kind of fortification in the western part of today’s Istanbul’s Galata at the entrance to the Golden Horn.\(^{20}\)

Based on these facts we can conclude that at the time of the Avar attack there was a separate city surrounded by walls in the northern section of the Golden Horn. We have already mentioned that the Church of St. Conon represented the northernmost position of the defending ships. We know from the sources that it was located at the sea just like the Church of St. Nicholas.\(^{21}\) It is therefore very likely that, as is the case of its southern counterpart, even the Church of St. Conon had a wall – in this case a wall around the separate Constantinople region of Sycae. The city ships thus created a sort of natural barrier, which was meant to replace the actual wall. The Blachernae Quarter was covered only by a single transverse wall which blocked access from land, but not from the sea. Therefore the defending ships called \textit{skafokaraboi} formed a configuration to prevent not only the invasion of the \textit{monoxyla} from the west from behind the St. Callinicus Bridge, but also from the unprotected northern coast of the Golden Horn.

This defensive method can be documented with a similar example – the Slav siege of Thessalonica, dated usually to 616. According to the \textit{Miracula sancti Demetrii}, the Slavs tried to invade the city from the sea through the Cellarion harbor, which was not protected by walls at the time. The defenders of Thessalonica “prepared wooden foundations, to which they attached protective chains, imitating the plated iron armor that protects the thighs.

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\(^{18}\) On the naval battle, see Ioannes Malalas 330,26–332,85.

\(^{19}\) For comparison, see \textit{Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae} (n. 17) 227–240.

\(^{20}\) \textit{Patria Konstantinoupolois} 3,235. In: Preger, Th. (ed.), \textit{Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum}. Leipzig 1907. It is mentioned here that Emperor Maurice built fortifications against the attack of the Bulgarian khagan who annihilated Thrace. As rightly pointed out by Albrecht Berger, the reference in question is not an anachronism, but rather an effort to clarify the text to the then readers. The Avars were virtually unknown in Byzantium at that time. Cf. Berger (n. 11) 690.

\(^{21}\) Janin (n. 4) 284.
Some of them had X-shaped sharpened poles, others were equipped with sword-shaped wedges protruding from the logs. The cargo ships for transporting timber called kybaiai were placed behind them at the entrance to the port; they were connected to each other with anchors and allowed passage in the case of fight.22

Thus, the Thessalonica defenders created a kind of double barrier in the area unprotected by the wall (see Map 3). The first line of defense was a chain, which barred the entry to the port. Similar practices were also used later by the defenders of Constantinople, who used a chain in the western part of the Golden Horn.23 However, the role of the wooden foundations is not clear from the text. It is possible that these were buoys to which the chain was attached.24 The description suggests that the defenders covered the wooden structure with iron bands and encircled it with sharpened poles, which were meant to prevent the Slavs to cut the chain.25 The second line of defense consisted of the transport ships, tied to each other. The use of the term passage by the author of Miracula probably indicates that the sailors created a kind of wooden platform on the joined ships, which connected the edge of the harbor with the opposite pier. This pier was similarly unprotected and the defenders had to quickly build a wooden palisade, which would prevent the Slavs to land in this section.26

In context of the location of the skafokaraboi, I would like to draw attention to the passage on the Avar siege of Constantinople, which is a part of the chronicle of Patriarch Nicephorus. It is true that it is a quite late and often discussed testimony, the most controversial part of which is the Avar khagan’s plan that became known to Patrikios Bonos. I leave its informative value without comment and focus on another passage: “However, Patrikios Bonos learned about it, joined the dieres and trieres, armed them and moved to the place where the signal was given (was to be given). Likewise, he also drew up

24 Lemerle (n. 22) 171. n. 5.
25 In this regard, see Μπακιρτζής (n. 22) 330.
26 Miracula Sancti Demetrii (n. 22) II.184, 176.30-31.
the dieres to the opposite bank [of the Golden Horn] and ordered immediately
to issue the signal by fire.”

Patriarch Nicephorus thus indicates that Bonos had the dieres and trieres
joined (ἀρμόσας) and subsequently moved (προσώρμησεν) and drew up
(ἐπέλασεν) to the opposite bank of the bay. It should be mentioned in this
context that the editor of Nicephorus’ chronicle Cyril Mango translate the term
ἀρμόσας as “fit out”. A different interpretation could also be an indication that
in the siege of Constantinople, the Constantinople vessels were joined together
and formed a firm line of defense of the city – a sort of sea wall.

These measures were not arbitrary because it is clear according to the
testimonies of the individual primary sources to the siege that the Slavic
monoxyla did not attack on the decisive day of the battle individually, but in
a closed formation. Theodore Synkellos, a probable eyewitness of the attack,
in his sermon dedicated to the Avar siege emphasizes twice that the kaghan
managed to turn the waters of the bay into dry ground using the monoxyla.
Synkellos first mentions it in connection with the beginning of the siege, and
then before the decisive attack on the city. During the final act of the attack
in the Golden Horn, another author, poet Georgios Pisides, reports that the
attackers “stretched their hollowed-out boats as a fishing net”. The Slavs
most likely made their way into the mouth of the Golden Horn using their
interconnected monoxyla. The ambiguous Pisides’ report has two possible

27 Nikephoros 58,26–60,30; c. 13.
28 Nikephoros 59; c. 13. As far as other term is concerned, the Vaticanus ms. of Breviarium
has originally προσώρμησεν, later corrected by C. D. Boor to προσώρμισεν. Cf. Nicephori
Archiepiscopi Constantinopolitani Opuscula historica, ed. C. de Boor. Leipzig 1880. 18.
29 It has been pointed out in the past that the word τὸ μονόξυλον represents a generic Greek term
that was used to describe a number of types of such vessels. On the problem of interpretation
of this term in Byzantine texts, see Орачев, А., Морското бойно майсторство на славя-
ни и пръбългари. Paleobulgarica 6 (1982) 2 101–109; STRÄSSE, P. M., „Τὸ μονόξυλον” in
Konstantin VII Porphyrogennetos’ Werk “De administrando Imperio”. Études balkaniques 26
Byzantinoslavica 52 (1991) 89–104; particularly on the siege of 626: HOLEK, R., Slavische Schiffe
30 Theodore Synkellos, De obsidione Constantinopolis homilia, ed. L. Sternbach. In: Analecta
Avarica. Rozpravy akademii umiej扪nosti. Wydzial filologiczny. Serya II. Tom XV. Cracoviae
1900. 301,5; 308,8–9.
epici (Studia patristica et byzantina 7) Ettal 1959. v. 444.
32 See Pertusi (n. 31, 223). On a possible way of joining the boats, see Novotný, B., Nejstarší
plavidla na českých vodách. Národopisný věstník československý 32 (1951) 1–2 263–269; and
interpretations: The Slavs either bound several *monoxyla* together and created a kind of catamaran or raft, or the *monoxyla* were joined with each other widthwise to fill the entire area of the Golden Horn.\(^{33}\) Something similar had already been devised their ancestors during the siege of Thessalonica in 586: they attempted to break into the unfortified port allegedly using a wide wooden “ground”. It must have been an impromptu wooden structure similar to a pier, which, however, the defenders of Thessalonica somehow managed to destroy and release to the open sea.\(^{34}\) The joined *monoxyla* were used by the Slavs as early as in the second major attack on Thessalonica in 616.\(^{35}\) The so-called “bound vessels” were used by the Slavs also in other attacks on Thessalonica in the second half of the 7th century.\(^{36}\)

In conclusion, let me state that when considering all the circumstances of the siege, the *skafokarabi* could not have sailed the waters of the Golden Horn without additional measures. Had there been no additional barrier on the opposite side of the bay, the Slavs and Avars could seriously threaten the free-standing ships from the northern shore of the Golden Horn. Let us also consider the relatively small width of the bay and the difficult maneuverability of these vessels. The most effective defense against a flank attack of the *monoxyla* was a barrier, which had to be attached to some other fortified places – otherwise it would not make sense. This fact is clearly demonstrated at the siege of Thessalonica, where the cargo ships were connected to the palisade which was used to protect the adjacent pier.

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\(^{33}\) For the interpretation of the Pisides’s term, see R. Hošek (n. 27, 103). On the terminology of such vessels, see Havlíková, (n. 29) 94–95.

\(^{34}\) *Miracula Sancti Demetrii* 1,145. (p. 151. ll. 26–27).

\(^{35}\) *Miracula Sancti Demetrii* 1,145. (p. 151. ll. 26–27).

\(^{36}\) *Miracula Sancti Demetrii* 2,243. (p. 211. ll. 19).
Map 1. The position of the Bridge of St. Callinicus
(based on map of MANGO [n. 3] 2.)

Map 3. The naval defense of Thessalonica in 616 (according to Μπακιρτζης [n. 22] 477).