

## BORDER CONTROL AND SHIPPING ON THE LOWER DANUBE IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND IN THE 9<sup>TH</sup> AND 10<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

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In the days of the Late Roman Empire, the *Limes Moesiae* followed the course of the Lower Danube. A Roman road, the *Via Istrum*, ran along the southern bank of the river, linking legion camps, forts, watchtowers, signal posts and stations, from *Sirmium* (Sremska Mitrovica) to *Noviodunum* (Isaccea). One of the three units of the *Classis Histriae* (i.e., the Danube Fleet), the *Classis Moesica*, secured the border control on the river. It operated not only along the Danube from the Iron Gates to the Danube Delta, but also along the northern Black Sea coast, from the delta to the Crimea. While the Danube Fleet played a significant role in the logistics for the legions by transporting food, weapons and troops it was also a great economic factor, due to the activities of its headquarters, and its ports, marinas and wharfs. The river trade on the Lower Danube covered a wide variety of commodities in the Late Roman period.

Even as the Danube border became gradually weakened in Late Antiquity, the amphorae and fine ware circulation in the Mediterranean world attest to the fact that the Lower Danube was integrated in the extensive network of the Mediterranean long-distance trade routes at least until the beginning of the seventh century. However, as the barbaric incursions into imperial territory intensified, urban life along the southern bank of the river fell into deterioration. From the late 600s to the 960s, the Bulgarians appear to have been making great efforts to keep the delta area under their control. The Byzantines, on the other hand, never gave up on the idea of recovering its control over the mouth of the Danube. Commercial shipping between the Middle and the Lower Danube seems to have been resumed after the Bulgarians and the East Franks concluded a peace treaty in the early 830s. In the 960s, river trade on the Danube appears to have been in full swing. Rock salt from Transylvania, silver, horses and slaves from Bohemia and Hungary were being shipped on the Danube.

**Keywords:** Border Control, Black Sea, Byzantine Thalassocracy, Danube Fleet, Lower Danube, River Trade, Shipping, *Via Istrum*.

### BORDER CONTROL AND SHIPPING ON THE LOWER DANUBE IN THE ROMAN IMPERIAL CENTURIES AND LATE ANTIQUITY

In Europe, the fortifications along the Danube have been part of the Roman military frontier for centuries.<sup>1</sup> While, in some locations, the frontier was moved

<sup>1</sup> On the Rhine-Danube *limes*, see C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study*, Baltimore – London, 1997; H. Delbrück, *History of the Art of War*, vol. 2: *The Barbarian Invasions*, trans. in English by W. J. Renfroe Jr., rev. ed., 1990. See also A. Mócsy, *Pannonia and Upper Moesia: History of the Middle Danube Provinces of the Roman Empire*, London – Boston, Mass., 1974).

north or south of the river as a result of military conquests, in other locations it remained a permanent defensive structure over long periods of time. The water border was under the control of the *Classis Histria* (i.e., the Danube Fleet), which was divided into three parts: *Classis Germanica*, *Classis Pannonica*, and *Classis Moesica*.<sup>2</sup>

A Roman road, the *Via Istrum*, ran along the southern bank of the river, linking legion camps, forts, watchtowers, signal posts and stations all the way from the Roman provinces of *Germania Superior* and *Raetia* in the west to the Black Sea in the east. Built, for the most part, under the emperors Domitian (81–96) and Trajan (98–117), that road was completed under Caracalla (198–211). The Lower Danube section of that road stretched between *Noviodunum* (present-day Isaccea, district of Tulcea)<sup>3</sup> in the east and *Sirmium* (present-day Sremska Mitrovica)<sup>4</sup> in the west.

The Lower Danube, with more than 1,000 km to be defended, was the longest and the most threatened part of the Danube *limes*. In the Roman imperial centuries, this part of the *Ripa Danubii* was defended by two legions at first, and by four legions under Marcus Aurelius (161–180). As for the *Classis Moesica*, it operated not only along the river from the Iron Gates to the delta, but also along the northern Black Sea coast, that is, from the delta to the Crimea. Initially, its headquarters were at *Noviodunum*; in 85 AD Emperor Domitian had it moved further upstream, to *Sexaginta Prista* (present-day Ruse). This naval center, established by Vespasian (69–79), was rebuilt and heavily fortified in around 250 AD, after the attacks by the Goths, and was destroyed in the sixth century by the Avars and the Slavs.<sup>5</sup> Other important anchors of this fleet were at *Novae* (near Svishtov), *Ulpia Oescus* (near Gigen) and *Tomis* (present-day *Constanța*).<sup>6</sup>

While the main role of the Danube Fleet was to guarantee peace through border control it also played a significant role in the logistics for the legions by transporting food, weapons and troops. Last but not least, the Danube Fleet was a great economic factor, due to the activities of its headquarters, and its ports, marinas and wharfs where the marines spent their pay, thus increasing the volume of local trade. After completing their military service, many navy veterans settled along the right bank of the Danube and in the nearby areas and played a role in the economy of the towns and forts along the border and its countryside.

The river trade on the Lower Danube covered a wide variety of commodities: salt and iron from *Noricum*, cattle, foodstuffs, cereals, ceramics, and gold from *Dacia*,

<sup>2</sup> D.B. Saddington, “*Classes*. The Evolution of the Roman Imperial Fleets”, in P. Erdkamp (ed.), *A Companion to the Roman Army*, Malden, MA – Oxford, etc., 2007, pp. 201–217.

<sup>3</sup> I. Barnea, “Dinogetia et Noviodunum, deux villes byzantines du Bas-Danube” *RESEE* 9, 1971, 3, p. 343–362.

<sup>4</sup> P. Milošević, *Arheologija i istorija Sirmijuma*, Novi Sad, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> O. Buonegru, M. Zahariade, “Les forces navales du Bas Danube et de la Mer Noire aux I<sup>er</sup>–VI<sup>e</sup> siècles”, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 11, 1996, p. 631–634.

<sup>6</sup> G. von Bülow, A. Milčeva (eds.), *Der Limes an der unteren Donau von Diokletian bis Heraklios*. Vorträge der Internationalen Konferenz Svištov, Bulgarien, 1-5 Sept. 1998, Sofia, 1999; P. Иванов, Долнодунавската отбранителна система между Дортикум и Дуросторум от Август до Маврикий, Sofia, 1999; L. Vagalinski, N. Sharankov, S. Torbatov (eds.), *The Lower Danube Roman Limes (1<sup>st</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> Century AD)*, Sofia, 2012.

wine and olive oil from the Balkan provinces were traded between the East and the West, to and from Rome, and from the North to the South. The freight ships and the rafts that carried goods up and down the river were protected by the imperial navy.

Being the most common transport containers in the Roman Empire, amphorae served as transportation package for wine, olive oil, and fish products. The findings of various types of amphorae along the Lower Danube and the western Black Sea coast attest to the commercial links of those areas with other parts of the empire. As has been shown by D. Paraschiv, in the Istro-Pontic region there have been found amphorae of four basic types (Pontic, Occidental, Oriental and North African), dating into the first through the seventh century.<sup>7</sup> The Occidental amphorae were produced in *Hispania*, *Italia*, and *Germania*, with the Hispanic amphorae being the most numerous ones. Occidental amphorae are mostly to be found on the sites of the Roman fortified cities along the Danube *limes* (i.e., *Novae*, *Carsium*, *Beroe*, *Aegyssus*, *Halmyris*) and, as one proceeds downstream, their numbers decrease. Most probably, these transport amphorae came to the Balkans through the Adriatic ports and, after crossing *Dalmatia* and *Moesia Superior*, they were carried further down the Danube to *Moesia Inferior*. However, they have not been found in the interior of *Moesia Superior* and along the western Black Sea coast. After 400 AD these types of amphorae disappear, which may lead us to conclude that, by the beginning of the fifth century, the commercial ties of the Lower Danube lands with the western parts of the Roman Empire were severed.<sup>8</sup>

The Oriental types of amphorae, on the other hand, seem to have been the most common transport vessels in the Lower Danube lands in the Roman and Early Byzantine periods. These amphorae were produced in the Aegean basin and reached the Lower Danube through the western Black Sea ports, their numbers steadily increasing from the fourth century onwards. Having a pitched interior, they contained wine, olive oil, vinegar, salsamenta (i.e., a fermented fish product) and a variety of ointments.<sup>9</sup> From the late 500s onwards, a type of North African amphorae, which were produced mostly in Tunisia, reached the Lower Danube lands, probably through the western Black Sea ports; they seem to have contained oil and fish products.<sup>10</sup>

The *Notitia dignitatum*<sup>11</sup> – and, more precisely, its section for the Eastern Roman Empire dating from around 395 AD – mentions a *classis Scythiae*, which was under the command of the *dux Scythiae*<sup>12</sup>, and a *classis Stradensis et Germensis* under the command of the *dux Moesiae primae*.<sup>13</sup> In 412 AD Emperor Theodosius II (408–450)

<sup>7</sup> D. Paraschiv, *Amfore romane și romano-bizantine în zona Dunării de Jos (sec. I–VII p. Chr.)*, Iași, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168–169.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> O. Seeck (ed.), *Notitia dignitatum: accedunt Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae et Laterculi provinciarum*, Berolini, 1876.

<sup>12</sup> *Notitia dignitatum. Pars Secunda. In partibus Orientis*, p. 24: cap. XXXIX. *Dux Scythiae*. <[http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0212/\\_P24.HTM](http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0212/_P24.HTM)> (3.16.2019).

<sup>13</sup> *Notitia dignitatum. Pars Secunda. In partibus Orientis*, p. 26: cap. XLI. *Dux Moesiae primae*. <[http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0212/\\_P26.HTM](http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0212/_P26.HTM)> (3.16.2019).

ordered the repair of the existing craft and the building of new boats, which were reconnaissance and shallow-drafted patrol ships (*lusoriae*).<sup>14</sup> *Classis Moesica* remained in function until the beginning of the fifth century, when the fleet was integrated in the Byzantine navy of Constantinople. Under Justinian the Great (527–565), the re-establishment of a permanently maintained fleet and the introduction of the *dromon* marks the point when the Byzantine navy began departing from its Late Roman roots and developing its own characteristic identity.

Even in the early fifth century trade seems to have been flourishing along the Lower Danube, as has been noted by Zosimus: commodities were being re-loaded from smaller river craft onto bigger sea-faring vessels.<sup>15</sup> Numismatic finds from *Bononia*, *Ratiaria*, *Oescus*, *Novae*, *Sexaginta Prista*, *Durostorum* and *Noviodunum* suggest that, in the fourth and early fifth centuries, commercial dealings and building activities were taking place along the right bank of the Danube.<sup>16</sup> “Barbarians” from the left bank of the river would cross over to its right bank, to trade with the locals at designated border spots. In each of the Lower Danube provinces, there was appointed an imperial functionary who was in charge of frontier trade. The *Notitia Dignitatum* lists the *comites commmerciorum* in the Eastern part of the empire, as follows: one *comes per Orientem et Aegyptum*; one *comes per Moesiam, Scythiam et Pontum*; and one *comes per Illyricum*.<sup>17</sup> As I have already pointed out, the grain supply, and the amphorae and fine ware circulation in the Mediterranean world bear evidence to the fact that the Lower Danube was integrated in the extensive network of the Mediterranean long-distance trade routes in Late Antiquity.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the troops that were dislocated along the Danube border seem to have been receiving olive oil as part of the *annona militaris* at least until some point in time during the sixth century, as could be seen from the spread of a certain type of transport amphorae along the right bank of the river.<sup>19</sup> There are also amphorae, which attest to the fact that there was

<sup>14</sup> Cod. Theod. VII.17.1. Cf. J.B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian*, 2 vols., Dover Publications, 2011, vol. 1, p. 412; Th. S. Burns, *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome: A Study Roman Military Policy and the Barbarians, ca. 375–425 A.D.*, Bloomington, Ind., 1994, p. 412.

<sup>15</sup> F. Paschoud (ed., trad.), *Zosime. Histoire nouvelle*, 3 vols., Paris, 1971–1989, vol. II, lib. IV, p. 272–273. Cf. Л. Симеонова, *Пътуване към Константинопол. Търговия и комуникации в Средиземноморския свят (края на IX – 70-те години на XI в.)*, Sofia, 2006, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> Л. Симеонова, “Крепостта Видинис/Бдин и „завръщането на Византия на Дунава“: реализация и крах на една имперска мечта”, in Л. Симеонова, Л. Тасева (съст., ред.), *Средновековните Балкани като световен кръстопът. Контакти и обмен* [Studia balcanica 32], Sofia, 2017, p. 93–108, see esp. p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> *Notitia dignitatum. Pars Secunda. In partibus Orientis*, cap. XIII. 6–3. <[http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0212/\\_P1H.HTM](http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0212/_P1H.HTM)> (3.16.2019). Cf. J. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, Baltimore, MD, 1986, p. 826.

<sup>18</sup> For more details, see M. Mundell Mango (ed.), *Byzantine Trade, 4<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> 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, Aldershot, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> O. Karagiorgou, “Mapping Trade by the Amphora”, in M. Mundell Mango (ed.), *Byzantine Trade, 4<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, p. 37–58, see esp. p. 57. Cf. above, notes 5–8.

military supply of wine to some Lower Danube ports, such as *Sexaginta Prista*, even in the late sixth and the first half of the seventh century.<sup>20</sup>

Due to lack of resources, however, the empire's defense system along the Danube border became gradually weakened. The reforms that were carried out first by Diocletian (284–305) and later on by Constantine I (306–337) and his successors resulted in the split of the Roman military into field armies and frontier troops.<sup>21</sup> The latter were called *limitanei* (or *ripenses*): their task was to patrol the borders and oppose small-scale raids, waiting for more substantial aid to be provided by the field troops (i.e., the *comitatenses*) that were dislocated in the interior of the provinces. But the *limitanei* gradually became part-time soldiers and eventually an unpaid *militia* relying, for their income, on the farming of the plots of land they had been granted.<sup>22</sup> Hoards of fourth-century silver coins as well as of early fifth-century gold coins, which have been found in Romania, suggest that the Romans may have been paying tribute to the Goths and the Huns living on the other side of the water border.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of the fourth century, the Roman *villa* economy in the Lower Danube lands appears to have collapsed.<sup>24</sup> The results of recent archaeological research in that area provide us with a possible explanation as to how and why there was such a radical break between the Roman Empire and its Early Byzantine successor on the Lower Danube. For example, the archaeological research on the site of *Nicopolis ad Istrum* in Bulgaria has shown that, in the fifth century, that city was replaced by a very different *Nicopolis*, both in layout and economy. Excavations of a nearby Late Roman fort (Dichin) provided additional information about the regional economy and the military situation on the Lower Danube in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>25</sup>

The restoration of the border fortifications along the Lower Danube seems to have begun some thirty or forty years after the Hunnic invasions, under Anastasius I (491–518). Thus, the defensive walls of *Bononia* (present-day Vidin) were strengthened, most probably in the days of that emperor, by the construction of a

<sup>20</sup> D. Dobрева, "Late Roman Amphorae on the Lower Danube: Trade and Continuity of the Roman Production", in *27<sup>th</sup> Congress of the REI CRETARIAE ROMANAE FAUTORES*, Belgrade, 19–26 Sept. 2010: <[https://www.academia.edu/597259/Late\\_Roman\\_amphorae\\_on\\_the\\_Lower\\_Danube\\_trade\\_and\\_continuity\\_of\\_the\\_Roman\\_production](https://www.academia.edu/597259/Late_Roman_amphorae_on_the_Lower_Danube_trade_and_continuity_of_the_Roman_production)> (3.16.2019).

<sup>21</sup> On the creation of the *limitanei*, see D. S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay AD 180–395*, London – New York, 2004, p. 451–453; E. A. Thomson, "Constantine, Constantius II, and the Lower Danube Frontier", *Hermes* 84, 1956, 3, p. 372–381.

<sup>22</sup> For the pay cancellation under Justinian I, see W. Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army, 284–1081*, Stanford, Cal., 1998, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> D. Moissil, "The Danube Limes and the Barbaricum (294–498 A.D.) A Study in Coin Circulation", *Histoire & mesure* 17, 2002, 3–4, p. 79–120.

<sup>24</sup> A. G. Poulter, "The Economy, the Countryside, Forts and Towns: The Early Byzantine Period on the Lower Danube during the 4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD", in H. Baron, F. Daim (eds.), *A Most Pleasant Scene and an Inexhaustible Resource. Steps Towards a Byzantine Environmental History* [Byzanz zwischen Orient und Okzident 6], Mainz, 2017, p. 79–100.

<sup>25</sup> A. G. Poulter, "The Transition to Late Antiquity on the Lower Danube: the City, a Fort and the Countryside", in *British Academy Scholarship Online*, Jan. 2012: DOI: 10.5871/bacad/9780197264027.001.0001.

new tower: a coin minted by Anastasius was found in it.<sup>26</sup> A building inscription in neighboring *Ratiaria* (present-day Archar, district of Vidin) suggests that its city walls were repaired by the same emperor.<sup>27</sup> Another Latin inscription, which was found in *Histria* (present-day Istros, district of Constanța), suggests that that city may have had its walls repaired under Anastasius, too.<sup>28</sup>

As the barbaric incursions into imperial territory intensified, urban life along the southern bank of the Danube fell into deterioration.<sup>29</sup> Out of the forty urban settlements that were located along the present-day Bulgarian section of the Danube River, very few, if any, seem to have survived the Avar raids in the 580s.<sup>30</sup> Theophylactes Symmoca, for example, writes that *Aquae*, *Bononia*, *Ratiaria* and some other towns in *Moesia* were destroyed by the Avars in 586.<sup>31</sup> In the Iron Gates section of the river the *limes* appears to have been destroyed much earlier, around the middle of the fifth century.<sup>32</sup> But, as has been shown by A. Madgearu, the Avar attack of 597/598 and the military revolt of 602 did not cause any major destruction on the *limes* in *Scythia minor*; the fall of the *limes* in those parts of the Eastern Roman Empire began in 614.<sup>33</sup>

Procopius of Caesarea (*De aedif.* IV, 6) provides a list of 600 forts and castles in the Balkans that were supposed to be rebuilt or repaired under Justinian the Great. It is hard to say how much of Justinian's fortification plan materialized and how many of the fortresses and forts listed in Procopius' work did not get a chance to be rebuilt and remained in a state of disrepair. Whatever the case, it seems that, along the Danube and in the immediate hinterland, some relatively small forts were built.<sup>34</sup> In the course of the sixth century the original Roman *limes* system was slowly melting away. By the middle of that century, the *Sclavi* had begun to raid deep into imperial territory; by the 580s, as the Slav communities on the Danube had become larger and more organized, and as the Avars exerted their influence, raids became larger and resulted in permanent settlement.

<sup>26</sup> Й. Атанасова, "Круглые и полигональные башни в Dacia ripensis", in *Thracia III. Primus congressus studiorum Thracicarum*, Sofia, 1974, p. 337–344, see esp. p. 338.

<sup>27</sup> В. Динчев, "Рациария (Ratiaria)", in Р. Иванов (съст., ред.), *Римски и ранновизантийски градове в България. Сборник в памет на проф. Т. Иванов*, t. I, Sofia, 2002, p. 13–30, see esp. p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Е. Попеску, *Inscripțiile grecești și latine din secolele IV–XIII descoperite în România: culese, traduse în românește, însoțite de indici și commentate*, București, 1976, № 112, p. 150–151.

<sup>29</sup> V. Velkov, *Cities in Thrace and Dacia in Late Antiquity. Studies and Materials* Amsterdam, 1977. Cf. Р. Иванов (съст., ред.), *Римски и ранновизантийски градове в България*; see above, note 27.

<sup>30</sup> For the Avar raids along the Lower Danube, see F. Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages 500–1250*, Cambridge, 2006, p. 65–71.

<sup>31</sup> Л. Симеонова, "Крепостта Видинис/Бдин и „завръщането на Византия на Дунава“", p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> M. Vasić, V. Kondić, "Le limes romain et paléo-byzantin des Portes de Fer", in *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms, 13. Internationaler Limeskongress*, Aalen, 1983 (Stuttgart, 1986), p. 542–560.

<sup>33</sup> A. Madgearu, "The Province of Scythia and the Avaro-Slavic Invasions (576–626)", *Balkan Studies* 37, 1996, 1, p. 35–61. Cf. C. Scorpan, *Limes Scythiae: Topographical and Stratigraphical Research on the Late Roman Fortifications on the Lower Danube* [BAR International Series, 88], Oxford, 1980.

<sup>34</sup> F. Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages 500–1250*, p. 45.

The final attempt at restoring the northern border of the empire was made from 591 to 605 AD, when the end of conflicts with Persia allowed Emperor Maurice (582–602) to transfer units to the north. Maurice aimed to re-establish a sturdy defense line along the Danube River, as Anastasius I had done a century earlier. Furthermore, he intended to keep the Avars and the Slavs off the Balkan provinces of the empire by invading their homeland: this would enable Roman troops to increase their pay by pillaging in hostile territory, making such campaigns more attractive. However, Maurice was deposed after a military revolt in 602 AD, and the Danube frontier fully collapsed about fifteen years later. In the interior of the Balkans, many fortresses were rebuilt either under Maurice or his successor, Phocas (602–610).<sup>35</sup> But it was Phocas' inaction with regard to the Balkan provinces of the empire, which was more or less caused by the deteriorating situation on the Persian front that paved the way for the eventual collapse of Roman rule over the Balkans.<sup>36</sup>

#### THE LOWER DANUBE AND THE DELTA AREA UNDER BULGARIA'S CONTROL FROM THE LATE 600S TO THE 960S

The peace, which Constantine IV (668–685) concluded with Asparukh in 681 AD, marked a turning point in the history of Byzantium: as has been noted by J. Haldon, the empire lost control of the Slavs “who had hitherto recognized Byzantine overlordship in the area about the Lower Danube from the Dniester to the Balkan range itself, including part of the plain of Wallachia, south Bessarabia, the Dobrudja, and the older province of *Moesia Inferior*”.<sup>37</sup> But the strategy, which Constantine IV used for attacking Asparukh's Bulgars, established a pattern of attacking Danube Bulgaria by the Byzantine forces in the centuries to follow: a fleet would be dispatched with troops to the mouth of the Danube to attack the Bulgarians from the rear, while an army would march from Thrace.

No sooner had Bulgaria settled in the northeastern corner of the Balkan Peninsula than the Byzantines and the Bulgarians started fighting over which one of them would establish control over the Lower Danube area. In order to protect themselves from incursions of the steppe peoples into the former Roman province of *Scythia Minor*, the Bulgarians built earth ramparts, which were up to four meters high and ten-to-fifteen meters wide at their base.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> F. Curta, *The Making of the Slavs: History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, c. 500–700*, Cambridge, 2001, p. 189.

<sup>36</sup> M. Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare*, New York – Oxford, 1998.

<sup>37</sup> J.F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 67.

<sup>38</sup> P. Рашев, *Старобългарски укрепления на Долния Дунав (VII–XI в.)*, Varna, 1982.

The empire relied on its maritime hegemony in order to maintain key positions in the vicinity of the Danube Delta. This allowed the Byzantines to launch occasional naval raids by entering into the delta, thus exerting pressure over the medieval Bulgarian state, of which the eastern frontier was the western Black Sea coast.<sup>39</sup> The empire never gave up on the idea of recovering its control over the mouth of the Danube and fought hard to preserve its naval supremacy in the delta area, even when military circumstances did not favor a resumption of Byzantine domination over *Scythia Minor*.<sup>40</sup>

Written sources as well as epigraphic and archaeological material attest the Bulgarians' control of the delta area in the ninth and early tenth centuries. Thus, according to the anonymous chronicle of the reigns of Michael I (811–813) and Leo V (813–820), the so-called *Scriptus incertus*, the Bulgarian ruler Krum banished a great number of Adrianopolitans to “the Bulgaria beyond the River Istros”.<sup>41</sup> Leo the Grammarian writes that these people were resettled “on the River Danube”.<sup>42</sup> The precise location of their resettlement to the north of the Danube is unknown. This happened shortly after Leo V's ascension to the throne in 813. About a quarter of a century later, in 837 some of these deportees attempted to return to their native land with the help of the imperial navy. A Bulgarian *comes* crossed the river in an effort to stop them but was defeated. Then another Bulgarian army was dispatched to prevent them from leaving but it failed to cross the river, probably stopped by Byzantine ships. Eventually, the Bulgarians asked the Magyars living in the northern parts of the Black Sea region for help; the Magyars were defeated too, so the deportees managed to board the imperial ships and leave.<sup>43</sup> This story is, in itself, illustrative of the bitter Byzantine-Bulgarian rivalry as regards the control over the delta area.

Lacking a fleet of their own, the Bulgarians found it difficult to prevent Byzantine ships from entering the river delta. The sea-borne imperial forces, on the other hand, did not always have sufficient manpower to carry out a successful attack on the Bulgarians: they often resorted to the help of Petcheneg or Magyar horsemen who were ferried across the river by Byzantine ships. For example, in his *Tactica*, Leo VI (886–912) tells the story of the imperial navy transferring *Turkoi* (Magyars?) across the Danube, to attack the Bulgarian ruler Simeon from the rear

<sup>39</sup> V. Tăpkova-Zaimova, “Quelques observations sur la domination byzantine aux bouches du Danube – le sort de Lykostomion et de quelques autres villes côtières”, *Studia Balcanica* I, 1970, p. 79–86; eadem, *Долни Дунав – гранична зона на византийския Запад*, Sofia, 1976, *passim*; V. Gjuzev, “Il Mar Nero ed il suo litorale nella storia del Medioevo Bulgaro”, *Byzantinobulgarica* VII, 1981, p. 11–24.

<sup>40</sup> V. Spinei, *The Romanians and the Turkic Nomads North of the Danube Delta from the Tenth to the Mid-Thirteenth Century*, Leiden, 2009, p. 56.

<sup>41</sup> This short anonymous chronicle is inserted into the text of Leo the Grammarian's *Chronographia*; cf. I. Bekker (ed.), *Leonis Grammatici Chronographia*, Bonn, 1842, p. 341–348, see esp. p. 345–346.

<sup>42</sup> *Leonis Grammatici Chronographia*, ed. Bekker, p. 207–208.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231–233.



in 895.<sup>44</sup> Leo's son, Constantine Porphyrogenitus, elaborates on this story by adding more details to it: when Simeon found out that a Byzantine fleet had arrived "on the river" – its precise landing spot is not mentioned in the text – and that the imperial ships were about to ferry *Turkoi* across the Danube in order to attack him, he ordered some very strong and thick ropes to be made. Those ropes could not be broken, so at first the Byzantine ships failed to cross the river. Then the flotilla's commander along with two brave sailors jumped off the *chelandion* and managed to cut the ropes, thus producing an opening through which the ships with the *Turkoi* could make it to the opposite bank of the river.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the development of a Bulgar-Slavic state in the northeastern Balkans, Byzantium's *thalassocracy* in the Black Sea remained undisputed.<sup>46</sup> Byzantium was "the real mistress of the Black Sea", due to its naval organization and technological superiority, particularly with regard to the design of the ships and the use of sea weapons, such as the Greek fire.<sup>47</sup> Byzantine ships were designed essentially for coastal cruising, which is why the Byzantines preferred cabotage to open sea routes. The developed network of Black Sea ports, harbors and landing places facilitated considerably coastal navigation.<sup>48</sup> The most significant and exploited routes connected the major Black Sea seaport towns with Constantinople. For example, such a popular coastal sea route linked the Byzantine capital with *Messembria* (present-day Nesebar), *Anchialos* (present-day Pomorie), and the harbors in the Danube Delta. Thence, this route followed the northwest coastal line and alongside the estuaries of the rivers Dniester and Dnieper went on to the northern Black Sea coast as far as Cherson from where, along the Crimean coast, the route set towards the *Cimmerian Bosphoros* (Kerch) and the Sea of Azov.<sup>49</sup> Some sources suggest that there existed an open sea route, which linked the northwestern parts of the Black Sea with its southeastern parts: in this way, *Trebizond* (present-day Trabzon) was connected with the Danube Delta area and it usually took nine days of sailing to complete the journey.<sup>50</sup>

In the ninth century, the Byzantines may have been masters of the sea due to their naval superiority but the Bulgarians never gave up on the idea of extending their territory as far as the estuaries of the Dniester and the Dnieper rivers,

<sup>44</sup> *Leo. Imp. Tactica* XVIII, 42. Cf. В. В. Кучма (перев.), *Лев VI Мудрый. Тактика Льва. Leonis imperatoris Tactica*, Sankt-Peterburg, 2012, p. 274.

<sup>45</sup> *Const. Porphy., De Administrando Imperio*, сар. 51, 112-120, in Г. Г. Литаврин, А. П. Новосельцев (ред.), *Константин Багрянородный. Об управлении империей*, Moskva, 1989, p. 238–240.

<sup>46</sup> G. Brătianu, *La Mer Noire des origines à la conquête ottomane*, München, 1969, p. 171–184.

<sup>47</sup> F. van Doorninck Jr., "Byzantium, Mistress of the Sea 330–641", in G. Bass (ed.) *A History of Seafaring Based on Underwater Archaeology*, London, 1972, p. 134–146.

<sup>48</sup> L. Christopher, "Byzantine Navigation and Sea Routes in the Black Sea" in *Εγκυκλοπαίδεια Μείζονος Ελληνισμού*: URL: <<http://blacksea.ehw.gr/Forms/fLemmaBody.aspx?lemmaid=11970>> (3.13.2019).

<sup>49</sup> Л. Симеонова, *Пътуване към Константинопол*, p. 152–156, 256–269.

<sup>50</sup> Б. Недков (ред.), *България и съседните ѝ земи през XII век според „Географията“ на Идриси*, Sofia, p. 97.

probably marching along overland routes. Thus, one of Omurtag's commanders, the *kopanos* Korsis, is said to have drowned in the Dnieper<sup>51</sup>: he may have been sent on an expedition against the Magyars living in that area.<sup>52</sup> Although, as far as the acquisition of the Dniester and the Dnieper estuaries is concerned, the Bulgarians' expansionist dreams may not have materialized they appear to have been making great efforts to keep the delta area under their control. In the 940s, it was probably the looming threat of Petcheneg incursions into Bulgarian territory that made a Bulgarian commander, the *zhupan* Dimiter, take actions to strengthen the defenses of his military district: the inscription of Mircea Voda attests to that.<sup>53</sup> Another inscription dated into the ninth or tenth centuries, which is found on the site of the ancient *Axiopolis* in the Hinog Island, mentions a certain Voislav – probably a local commander of Slavic origins, in service to the Bulgarian rulers.<sup>54</sup> Last but not least, there is the Basarabi-Murfatlar cave complex<sup>55</sup> with its tenth-century graffiti-inscriptions in Greek and Old Bulgarian (the latter being written in both the Glagolitic and the Cyrillic scripts)<sup>56</sup> as well as with some runic inscriptions.<sup>57</sup> The complex is a relict from a widespread monastic phenomenon in tenth-century Bulgaria, as F. Curta has noted;<sup>58</sup> but it also bears evidence to the fact that monks who settled there must have felt quite safe in that area, thanks to the defense provided by the Bulgarian military.

Bulgaria seems to have kept the mouths of the River Danube under its control at least until the late 960s when Svyatoslav of Kiev invaded the country. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, who seems to have written his *De Administrando Imperio* around the middle of the tenth century, says that the whole territory between the delta and the *Ditsina* (i.e., present-day Provadiiska) River belongs to Bulgaria<sup>59</sup>. The Black Sea port of Constanța was within Bulgarian territory, too. However, in the tenth century there seem to have been no Bulgarian forts on the left bank of the river.<sup>60</sup> And if ever there was a Bulgarian fort on *Păcuiul lui Soare*, as P. Diaconu believed, it must have been built after the siege of *Dorostolon* in 971.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>51</sup> V. Beševlev, *Die protobulgarischen Inschriften*, Berlin, 1963, p. 285–286.

<sup>52</sup> V. Spinei, *The Romanians and the Turkic Nomads*, p. 57.

<sup>53</sup> Д. П. Богдан, “Добруджанская надпись 943 года (палеографический и лингвистический очерк)”, *Romanoslavica* 1, 1958, p. 88–104.

<sup>54</sup> E. Popescu, *Inscripțiile grecești și latine din secolele IV–XIII*, p. 203, № 202.

<sup>55</sup> F. Curta, “The Cave and the Dyke: A Rock Monastery on the Tenth-century Frontier of Bulgaria”, *Studia Monastica* 41, 1999, № 1, p. 129–149.

<sup>56</sup> К. Попконстантинов, “Die Inschriften des Felsklosters Murfatlar”, *Die Slawischen Sprachen* 10, 1986, p. 77–106.

<sup>57</sup> В. Бешевлиев, “Етническата принадлежност на рунните надписи при Мурфатлар”, *Векове* 1976, 4, p. 12–22.

<sup>58</sup> F. Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages*, p. 232.

<sup>59</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio*, IX, 91–102, in Г. Г. Литаврин, А. П. Новосельцев (ред.), *Константин Багрянородный. Об управлении империей*, p. 50.

<sup>60</sup> A. Madgearu, *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Leiden, 2013, p. 33.

<sup>61</sup> P. Diaconu, “Cetatea bizantină din insula Păcuiul lui Soare”, *BMI* 1, 1971, p. 3–20. Cf. A. Madgearu, *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube*, p. 33.

### REVIVAL OF THE SHIPPING ON THE MIDDLE AND THE LOWER DANUBE IN THE NINTH AND TENTH CENTURIES

In the Bulgarian controlled territory on the right bank of the Danube, new settlements emerged only in the latter part of the ninth century; they were built either upon the ruins of the Late Antique settlements, or in close proximity to them.<sup>62</sup> Albeit slowly at first, in the course of time these new, medieval settlements became involved in the river trade.

Probably, it was in the 830s that the sailing from the Lower to the Middle Danube and back was made possible by the conclusion of the Bulgarian-Frankish peace treaty. After nearly nine years of war, the Avar Khaganate on the Middle Danube was finally destroyed by the Franks in 796. In 804, Bulgaria conquered the southeastern Avar lands of Transylvania and southeastern Pannonia up to the Middle Danube; many Avars became subjects of the Bulgarian Empire. In 818, the Slavic tribes, who inhabited the former Avar domains on the Middle Danube, rebelled against the increasingly centralized Bulgarian suzerainty in the west and sought the support of the Frankish Emperor Louis the Pious (813–840). Failing to get Frankish cooperation in solving the Slavic problem, the Bulgarian ruler Omurtag took punitive actions against the Slavs, sending fleets along the Drava and the Danube in 827 and then again in 829.<sup>63</sup> Leading an expedition on the Tisza, one of Omurtag's commanders, the *zera-tarkan* Onegarion, drowned in that river.<sup>64</sup> Eventually, the Eastern Franks and the Bulgarians established friendly relations<sup>65</sup>: this facilitated the east-west communications along the Danube.

The only written evidence of commercial shipping along the Lower Danube in the late 800s is to be found in the vita of St. Blasius of Amoreia (†912/13).<sup>66</sup> After spending some time in Bulgaria, he boarded a ship and sailed upstream en route to Rome.<sup>67</sup> When the ship reached a gorge (the Iron Gates?), it was attacked by river pirates; St. Blasius was mistaken for a merchant carrying goods.<sup>68</sup> The tenth-century coins, which have been found near Orșova,<sup>69</sup> attest to the fact that tradesmen

<sup>62</sup> E.g., see the case of Bononia/Vidinis: В. Вълков, "Седалището и териториалният обхват на Бдинската област от средата на IX в. до началото на XI в.", *Известия на музеите в Северозападна България* 13, 1988, p. 21–47.

<sup>63</sup> L. Simeonova, "The Short Fuse. Examples of Diplomatic Abuse in Byzantine and Bulgarian History", *Byzantinische Forschungen* 23, 1996, p. 55–75, see esp. p.58.

<sup>64</sup> V. Beševlev, *Die protobulgarischen Inschriften*, p. 287.

<sup>65</sup> V. Gjuzelev, "Bulgarisch-fränkische Beziehungen in den ersten Hälfte des IX. Jahrhunderts", *Byzantinobulgarica* 2, 1966, p. 15–39.

<sup>66</sup> *Vita Blasii Amorensis*, in AASS Nov. 4, p. 657–669.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 660E – 661A. Cf. В. Гюзелев, "Данни за българското минало в житието на Власий Аморийски (IX–X в.)", in В. Гюзелев, *Средновековна България в светлината на нови извори*, Sofia, 1981, p. 51–60.

<sup>68</sup> *Vita Blasii Amorensis*, chap. 9, in AASS Nov. 4, 661B–C.

<sup>69</sup> L. Kovács, *Münzen aus der ungarischen Landnahmezeit: archäologische Untersuchung der arabischen, byzantinischen, westeuropäischen und römischen Münzen aus dem Karpatenbecken des 10. Jahrhunderts*, Budapest, 1989, p. 51, №№ 260, 263.

sailing up and down the Danube were regularly assaulted by pirates in that narrow section of the river. The archaeological finds that have been discovered along the Danube transport corridor and the connecting secondary roads provide evidence of the ninth-and tenth-century revival of trade in the Lower Danube lands. Coins minted by Byzantine emperors, along with a variety of exotic objects, suggest that there were merchants of various nationalities traveling along that corridor.<sup>70</sup>

Rock salt from Transylvania seems to have been one of the commodities that were transported up the Danube in the late 800s.<sup>71</sup> Slaves were yet another commodity, which appears to have been transported along the Danube in the tenth century. Two identical tenth-century iron slave collars, one of them found near Krivina (district of Ruse) and the other one found near Brno,<sup>72</sup> suggest that slaves may have been transported along the Danube from Central Europe down to the mouth of the river where they may have been re-loaded onto bigger ships in order to be taken to Constantinople.<sup>73</sup> V. Beševliev argues that Bulgarians may have acted as intermediaries in the slave trade of that time period;<sup>74</sup> however, there is no written evidence of Bulgarians taking part in that kind of trade.

On certain occasions, travelers used alternative, roundabout routes in order to avoid the dangers arising from political tensions, open hostilities, or natural disasters in the immediate vicinity of the Danube. They would sail on the interconnected Danube tributaries down to a point where it was safe to either get back onto the big river or continue the journey by land. Thus, in 892 the Frankish envoys dispatched by King Arnulf (887–896) to Bulgaria wished to avoid traveling along the overland route, which ran through the territory held by Arnulf's archenemy, the Moravian Prince Svetopolk (870/871–894). So, when they reached the Croatian kingdom, Prince Braslav, who was Arnulf's loyal vassal, gave them a boat to sail down the Odra, the Kulpa, and the Sava rivers. Arnulf's envoys probably landed at the confluence of the Sava and the Danube where they met with the "Bulgarian king". In the following spring, the Frankish envoys went home, following the same route that would keep them out of reach of Svetopolk's people.<sup>75</sup>

In the 960s, river trade on the Danube appears to have been in full swing. In the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, under 6477 AM (969 AD), there is an account of Prince Svyatoslav's desire to move his capital to the Lower Danube: "Svyatoslav announced to his mother and his boyars, 'I do not care to remain in Kiev, but

<sup>70</sup> Л. СИМЕОНОВА, *Пътуване към Константинопол*, p. 135–137. Cf. A. Lewis, "The Danube Route and Byzantium 802–905", in A. Lewis, *The Sea and Medieval Civilizations*, Variorum Reprints, London, 1978, VIII.

<sup>71</sup> E. Dümmler (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses*, a. 892, in *MGH SS III*, Hannover, 1839, p. 408.

<sup>72</sup> M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900*, Cambridge, 2001, fig. 25.1, 25.2.

<sup>73</sup> On the main routes of slave trade in the western Black Sea region, see Л. СИМЕОНОВА, *Пътуване към Константинопол*, p. 137–138.

<sup>74</sup> V. Beševliev, *Die protobulgarische Periode der bulgarischen Geschichte*, Amsterdam, 1981, p. 414.

<sup>75</sup> *Annales Fuldenses*, a. 892, ed. Dümmler, in *MGH SS III*, p. 408.

should prefer to live in Pereyaslavets on the Danube, since that is the center of my realm, where all riches are concentrated; gold, silks, wine, and various fruits from Greece, silver and horses from Hungary and Bohemia, and from Rus' furs, wax, honey, and slaves."<sup>76</sup>

Obviously, Little Preslav or, as the Greek sources call it, *Presthlavitza* (Πρεσθλαβίτζα) was a big trading center near the mouth of the Danube. Its precise location, however, remains unknown and is the subject of scholarly debate.<sup>77</sup> The Byzantine coins, which are found in the Dobrudja, show that international trade was taking place in that area in the ninth through the eleventh century.<sup>78</sup> The economic and strategic importance of Little Preslav is further illustrated by the significant number of seals of tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantine imperial functionaries, with the place name *Presthlavitza* on them. However, in the 1020s Little Preslav may have started to lose its importance as a center of international trade, due to the intensified Petcheneg raids.<sup>79</sup>

Byzantium's "return on the Danube", followed by the administrative and military reorganization of the conquered Bulgarian lands,<sup>80</sup> managed to boost trade in the Lower Danube lands and along the western Black Sea coast.

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<sup>76</sup> S.H. Cross, O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (trans., ed.), *The Russian Primary Chronicle. Laurentian Text* [Medieval Academy of America Publications 60], Cambridge, Ma., 1953, p. 86.

<sup>77</sup> S. Franklin, J. Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus 750–1200*, London – New York, 1996, p. 147, n. 23: cited bibliography. Cf. N. Oikonomides, "Presthlavitza, the Little Preslav", *Südost-Forschungen* 42, 1983, p. 5–9.

<sup>78</sup> G. G. Custurea, *Circulația monedei bizantine în Dobrogea (secolele IX–XI)*, Constanța, 2000.

<sup>79</sup> И. Божилев, В. Гюзелев, *История на Добруджа*, т. 2. *Средновековие*, Veliko Tarnovo, 2004, p. 97–103.

<sup>80</sup> P. Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier. A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204*, Cambridge, 2000. See also A. Madgearu, *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, passim.

