4. ILLYRICUM AND DALMATIA 378–600: A VERY BRIEF OVERVIEW

The major point of the prevailing metanarrative of the ‘Slav migrations’, which completed its formation in the 19th century, was that the Slavs arrived in an ‘empty house’, the depopulated lands whose inhabitants were either exterminated or displaced due to the period of migrations in the last centuries of the Roman Empire. It is necessary at this point to give a basic overview of the events that occurred in the region after the battle of Hadrianopolis in 378, and when the emperor Heraclius ordered a withdrawal of the Eastern Roman troops in c. 620s, for a better understanding of the political background to the social and identity transformations which took place in late- and post-Roman Illyricum and especially Dalmatia. This was a very complex period filled with events, battles and leaders, so it is difficult, if not impossible, to form a simplified narrative of the political events in western Illyricum in Late Antiquity. The material record is also plentiful, especially in regard to Christian architecture and fortifications, providing important evidence for the process of social transition in Late Antiquity.

Historical narratives

The relative security of Illyricum in the period of the early to middle Roman Empire provided an opportunity for significant economical advancement of the area, especially in the Pannonia and Dalmatian littoral. However, the weakening of Roman defences on the Danubian limes in Late Antiquity exposed the region, in particular the Pannonian plains, to migrating groups from the north, which crossed the Danube and settled inside the Empire. Roman administrative and security structures were crumbling and the final division of the Empire after

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1 The general background to these events is covered by Halsall 2007, see also overview of current debates in Pohl 2008. A still acceptable narrative for Dalmatia and Pannonia is by Wilkes 1969: 416–38 and 1972: 382–6. A more recent general synthesis of the events in Southeastern Europe after 420 can be found in Whitby 2000 and Curta 2006: 39–69. Detailed recent regional studies of western Illyricum in Late Antiquity are found in Lippold 1996; Lotter et al. 2003: 7–30; southern Pannonia in Andrić 2002; Gračanin 2006a; 2006b; 2007a; 2007b.
the death of Emperor Theodosius I in 395 left Illyricum divided between the Eastern and Western Empire. Western Illyricum was administered by the Italian prefecture of the Western Empire, as the Diocese of Illyricum, divided into the provinces Dalmatia, Pannonia I, Pannonia II, Pannonia Valeria, Savia, Noricum Ripense and Noricum Mediterraneum. The southeastern part of the Dalmatian province was separated during Diocletian’s times (c. 300) and called Praevalitana – in 395 Praevalitana became part of the Dacian diocese administered by the Eastern Empire (Map 1). The weakening of Roman political structures and the omnipresent lack of security affected significant emigration of the Roman population from Pannonia in this period, especially in the early 5th century. Assumption by the scholarship, and the limited evidence we have at our disposal, confirms this. The Dalmatian hinterland and Dalmatian coastal belt were in a much better position than Pannonia, as they stood outside of the major invasion routes and the areas of intensive fighting, but certainly this region was also affected economically and politically by those events, especially with the outbreaks of plague and the wars of reconquista of Justinian’s era.

The defeat and death of Emperor Valens in 378 left Pannonia wide open to the wanderings of the Goths and other trans-Danubian groups; however, it does not appear that much damage was done overall, although certain cities, such as Jerome’s Stridon or the city of Mursa (Osijek), were destroyed. Beginning with the uprising of the Pannonian foederates in 395, the crumbling of Roman structures in Pannonia was well under way, ultimately resulting in the end of Roman Pannonia, which would ultimately come with the arrival of the Huns and the establishment of their Empire under Attila in 440–453. A very significant event occurred when western Illyricum, Dalmatia and eastern Pannonia were formally transferred from the Western to the Eastern

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2 See Weiler 1996 on late antique provincial structure of the region.
4 E.g. there was assumed to be a plague in the 3rd century, which is shown in the cemetery in Lika: D. Perkić 2002: 121–2, or Justinian’s plague in the mid-6th century, Goldstein 1992: 65–7; Grmek 1998: 792–4. What the demographic impact of Justinian’s plague was, is difficult to ascertain and opinions differs, see Horden 2005: 153–6.