MILITARY ENCOUNTERS AND DIPLOMATIC AFFAIRS
IN THE NORTH BALKANS
DURING THE REIGNS OF ANASTASIUS AND JUSTINIAN

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Abstract

Balkan history in the late 5th to 6th c. A.D. period is viewed by scholars as, at best, a respite from a series of devastating barbarian raids and, at worst, as another stepping-stone on the path to the inevitable loss of imperial control over the region. This paper redresses these perceptions by portraying the reigns of Anastasius and Justinian as a period in which the Romans/Byzantines were taking the initiative and ‘winning’ in their military and diplomatic dealings with the barbarians. These emperors devoted considerable political energy and economic and military resources to restoring imperial military authority in the northern Balkans.

INTRODUCTION

The history of military encounters and diplomatic affairs in the northern Balkans between the late 5th and late 6th c. A.D. has not been treated in great detail by secondary works. Modern histories of the late antique Balkans have focused predominantly on the 4th to 5th c. and 6th to 7th c. periods, during which the area was invaded and colonised by Visigoths, Ostrogoths and the Huns of Attila; and the Avars and Slavs, respectively. The works that cover the Anastasian and Justinianic periods of Balkan history have done so in the context of broader histories on the late antique or 6th c. Balkans, or in studies of the barbarian groups that are attested in the Balkans in this period. Meanwhile, histories of the Anastasian and


2 The articles in Poulter (2007a) examine the history and archaeology of the Balkans in Late Antiquity. However, although these cover the Justinianic period, none take into account large-scale Anastasian and Justinianic military campaigns in the region. On the
Justinianic periods have generally concentrated on the Persian Wars, and, for Justinian, the reconquest of the West Roman provinces.\(^3\)

There has been an associated tendency to view the Balkan region in this period as a backwater, a low priority to the imperial authorities, which, still reeling from the invasions and settlement by Goths and Huns during the 4th to 5th c. A.D., would be doomed as soon as a barbarian group as powerful as Attila’s Huns emerged once again north of the Danube.\(^4\) Even though historians have credited Justinian for his fortification programme and diplomatic policies in the Balkans, they have not recognised his strategic prioritisation of the region and deployment of field armies there.\(^5\)

The nature of the textual sources is partly to blame. What little material has survived on Balkan affairs in the Anastasian and Justinianic periods comprises isolated references in chronicles or narrative histories.\(^6\) For example, Procopius’ passages on the Balkans are brief and fragmentary in comparison with those on the Persian, Vandalic and Gothic wars, to which he devoted entire books. Further, this major historian portrays imperial policies in the Balkans in a negative light, using hyperbolic phrases to exaggerate the impact and frequency of barbarian raids, and to play down imperial successes on the battlefield.\(^7\)

Archaeologists have contributed to this gloomy portrayal of the 5th to 6th c. A.D. Balkans. Because most of the material evidence cannot be accurately dated to a particular reign, they have understandably tended

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\(^3\) Cameron (2005); Evans (1996); Maas (2005) on Justinian. See Haarer (2006) on Anastasius. These works do not include chapters specifically devoted to the Balkans.

\(^4\) Jones (1964) 299; Liebeschuetz (2007) 101; Stein (1949–59) volume 2, 310 refers to the Balkans as ‘une entrave génante’.

\(^5\) Wozniak (1978) 147 and 157 recognises Justinian’s diplomatic skill in dealing with the Pannonian barbarians, but sees this as an example of ‘conciliatory opportunism’, driven by military vulnerability in the Balkans. Similarly, although Whitby (2007) 140–41 acknowledges the recovery in imperial fortunes and interest in the Balkans from the reign of Anastasius, he stresses that the region was a low strategic priority and denuded of mobile field troops. Curta (2005) 181–86 highlights the effectiveness of the Justinianic fortification of the Lower Danube frontier, but sees it as a sign that, after a brief period following the ‘Endless Peace’ with Persia, Roman troops were drawn from the region and re-deployed in other areas of the empire. Liebeschuetz (2007) 112–13 highlights barbarian raids, but does not refer to imperial military responses, which he relates to the lack of field forces in the Balkans.

\(^6\) Procop. Pers. and Goth.; Malalas; Marcell. com.; Agath.; Menander.

\(^7\) Especially in Procop. Anec. For instance, when discussing barbarian raids on the Balkans at 2.11, he states: ‘from year’s end to year’s end they all took it in turn to plunder and pillage everything within their reach’. For a detailed analysis of Procopius’ treatment of the Balkans, see Sarantis (forthcoming).