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THE EVOLUTION OF SLAVIC SOCIETY AND THE SLAVIC INVASIONS IN GREECE

The First Major Slavic Attack on Thessaloniki, A.D. 597

IN A SCHOLARLY GATHERING which has as its purpose the centennial celebration of the American School of Classical Studies the topic of my communication is appropriate by virtue of the fact that the excavators who have carried on the investigations of the Athenian Agora, ancient Corinth, and Kenchreai have also turned their attention to the fates of these sites in the 6th and 7th centuries after Christ, the period of the Slavic migrations and settlements in the Balkan peninsula. The appearance of new peoples and the transformation of the religious life of these areas are among the most crucial factors in the evolution of early mediaeval Greek culture.¹ The fate of mediaeval Greece at this juncture in history is, accordingly, closely intertwined with the dynamics of Byzantium's internal evolution, which profoundly altered urban and rural life,² and with the Avaro-Slavic invasions, which deracinated much of Byzantine society in the north and central Balkans and which also had important effects within the Greek peninsula.³

- ¹H. A. Thompson and R. E. Wycherley, *The Athenian Agora*, XIV, *The Agora of Athens*, Princeton 1972.
H. A. Thompson, "Athenian Twilight 267-600 A.D." *JRS* 49, 1959, pp. 11-72.
J. Travlos, "Χριστιανικαὶ Ἀθήναι," *Θρησκευτικὴ καὶ ἠθικὴ ἐγκυκλοπαιδεία*, Athens 1962, pp. 709-768;
"Ἀθήναι," *Δομῆ*, pp. 159-200; *Pictorial Dictionary of Athens*, New York 1971; *Πολεοδομικὴ ἐξέλιξις τῶν Ἀθηνῶν*, Athens 1969, pp. 125-162.
A. Frantz, "Paganism to Christianity in the Temples of Athens," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 19, 1965, pp. 187-207.
R. Scranton, *Corinth*, XVI, *Mediaeval Architecture in the Central Area of Corinth*, Princeton 1957.
C. Morgan, *Corinth*, XI, *The Byzantine Pottery*, Princeton 1942.
G. Davidson, "The Avar Invasion of Corinth," *Hesperia* 6, 1937, pp. 227-239; *Corinth*, XII, *The Minor Objects*, Princeton 1952, pp. 5-6, 199, 266-267.
R. Hohlfelder, *Kenchreai, Eastern Port of Corinth*, III, *The Coins*, Leiden 1978, p. 4; "Barbarian Invasions into Central Greece in the Sixth Century of the Christian Era. More Evidence from Corinthia," *Eastern European Quarterly* 9, 1975, pp. 251-258.

²Most seminal on the fate of the forms of late ancient life in the Balkans are the works of V. Velkov, *Cities in Thrace and Dacia in Late Antiquity* (Studies-Materials), Amsterdam 1977; "Die antike und die mittelalterliche Stadt im Ostbalkan (im Licht der neuesten Forschungen)" (Die Stadt in Südosteuropa. Struktur und Geschichte), *Südosteuropa Jahrbuch* 7, 1968, pp. 23-24; "Das Schicksal der antiken Städte in den Ostbalkanländern," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität, Berlin* (Gesellschaft- und sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe) 12, 1963, fasc. 7/8, pp. 839-843; "Die Stadt und das Dorf in Südosteuropa. Die Antike," *Actes du II^e congrès international des études du sud-est européen*, II, *Histoire*, Athens 1972, pp. 147-165; "Les campagnes et la population rurale en Thrace en IV^e-VI^e s.," *Byzantino-Bulgarica* 1, 1962, pp. 31-66. Of particular interest is his examination of the transformation of late ancient urban life, the siphoning off of municipal income by the central government and the corresponding stagnation which it produced in the more customary manifestations of ancient urban life.

³The literature on the Avars and Slavs and their invasions and settlements in the Balkans is vast, and I only indicate here some basic guides to the subject:

The problem of the Slavs in Greece remains an extraordinarily complex one because of the nature of the sources. By and large the written sources for the late 6th and 7th centuries are unsatisfactory for the question of the Slavs in Greece inasmuch as these sources concentrate on events outside Greece, are few in number, and some of them were written at a later period.⁴ The archaeological evidence is considerable, though the results of excavations at Greek sites have been somewhat disappointing, up until the late 1950's and early 1960's, inasmuch as specific material evidence of the presence of the Slavs was largely absent, went unidentified, or was of a negative type.⁵ A Slavic archaeology proper in Greece came into being with the identification of material items and practices specifically identifiable as Slavic, to wit, a Slavic pottery, the so-called Prague type, and a Slavic type of burial, featuring the cremation of the dead. The delay in the incorporation of a Slavic component in archaeological investigations and in the use of appropriate techniques, applied to excavations carried out in Greece, was due in part to the late development of a general Slavic archaeology.

H. Ditten, "Zur Bedeutung der Einwanderung der Slawen," in *Byzanz im 7. Jahrhundert. Untersuchungen zur Herausbildung des Feudalismus*, F. Winkelmann, H. Köpstein, H. Ditten, I. Rochow, edd., Berlin 1978, pp. 73-160.

S. Vryonis, *Ἱστορία τῶν Βαλκανικῶν λαῶν. Παραδόσεις*, Athens 1979.

M. W. Weithmann, *Die slavische Bevölkerung auf der griechischen Halbinsel. Ein Beitrag zur historischen Ethnographie Südosteuropas*, Munich 1978.

P. Charanis, "On the Demography of Mediaeval Greece: A Problem Solved," *Balkan Studies* 20, 1979, pp. 193-218.

Vryonis, "Recent Scholarship on Continuity and Discontinuity of Culture: Classical Greeks, Byzantines, Modern Greeks," *The 'Past' in Mediaeval and Modern Greek Culture*, Malibu 1978 (on the controversies surrounding the theory of Fallmeyer), pp. 237-256.

F. Barišić, "Proces slovenske kolonizacije istočnog Balkana," pp. 11-25, *Simpozijum pred-slovenski etničke elementi na Balkanu u etnojenezi Južnih Slovena*, A. Benač and B. Čović, edd., Sarajevo 1969.

B. Grafenauer, "Proces doseljavanja Slovena na zapadni Balkani u istočne Alpe," pp. 29-55, *op. cit.*

V. Tapkova-Zaimova, *Našestviti i etnički promeni na Balkanija prez VI-VII v.*, Sofia 1966; "Sur quelques aspects de la colonisation slave en Macédoine et en Grèce," *Études Balkaniques* 1, 1964, pp. 111-124.

M. Comşa, "Slavii pe teritoriul R.P.R. in sec. VI-IX in lumina cercetarilor arheologice," *Studii și cercetari de istorie veche, București XX*, i, 1959, pp. 65ff.

I. Nestor, "L'établissement des Slaves en Roumanie à la lumière de quelques découvertes archéologiques récentes," *Dacia*, n.s. 5, 1961, pp. 429-448.

On the Avars:

A. Avenarius, *Die Avaren in Europa*, Amsterdam 1974.

J. Kovačević, *Avarski Kaganat*, Belgrade 1977.

D. Csallany, *Archäologische Denkmäler der Awarenzeit in Mitteleuropa; Schrifttum und Fundorte*, Budapest 1956.

A. Kollautz, *Denkmäler byzantinischen Christentums aus der Awarenzeit der Donauländer*, Amsterdam 1970.

⁴For a survey of the written sources and the relevant literature consult Weithmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-53.

⁵The matter of belt buckles and related metallic objects is a difficult one inasmuch as there is some confusion as to whether these can be definitively identified with Slavs alone or rather with Germans or with both. Weithmann and Werner assume that there is a clearly identifiable Slavic type (Weithmann, *op. cit.* [footnote 3 above], 239ff.; J. Werner, "Neues zur Frage der slawischen Bügelfibeln aus südosteuropaischen Ländern," *Germania* 38, 1960, pp. 114-120). For the older controversy over these items see D. Pallas, "Ἀρχαιολογικά τεκμήρια τῆς καθόδου τῶν βαρβάρων εἰς τὴν Ἑλλάδα," *Ἑλληνικά* 14, 1955, pp. 87-105.

The basic identification of a Slavic pottery, the so-called Prague pottery, was established systematically only in 1940 by the Czech archaeologist Borkovski.⁶ Though tentative identification of Avaric, or Slavic, or Avaro-Slavic remains had been made by Soteriou at Nea Anchialos in 1929 and by Davidson (Weinberg) at Corinth in 1937,⁷ there was nothing certainly identifiable as Slavic until Yalouris uncovered the first major Slavic cemetery in Greece at the time of the building of the new museum at Olympia. The tombs contained the positive evidence of a Slavic presence, i.e., cremation of the dead and a rough, hand-made pottery of the well-known Prague type.⁸ Inasmuch as the graves were immediately above the latest Roman stratum, Yalouris dated the tombs to the 6th century.⁹ Since then, the French excavations at Argos have uncovered some fragments of Slavic pottery in the rubble of the bath house, the destruction of which has been tentatively dated to 585/6,¹⁰ while a soldier's burial discovered in 1938 in the colonnade of the South Stoa of ancient Corinth, and long a mystery, was explained by Yalouris on the basis of the Slavic vase found in the grave.¹¹

Thus the beginnings of a new phase in the archaeology of the early middle ages in Greece has been established with the identification of specific Slavic objects and prac-

⁶T. Borkovski, *Staroslavanská keramika ve střední Evropě*, Prague, 1940. Z. Hilczerowna, "Praski typ ceramiki," *Słownik starożytności słowiańskich* 4, 1970, pp. 305–309. It has since made substantial progress: Z. Vana, *Einführung in die Frühgeschichte der Slaven*, Neumunster 1970; W. Hensel, *Die Slawen im frühen Mittelalter, ihre materielle Kultur*, Berlin 1965; I. P. Rusanova, *Slaviianskie drevnosti VI–VII vv*, Moscow 1976.

The application of the methods and techniques of this Slavic archaeology is apparent now in the other Balkan countries. Important in this respect is the identification of the earliest large Slav graveyard in Rumania at Sarata Monteoru: I. Nestor, "La nécropole slave d'époque ancienne de Sărata Monteoru," *Dacia*, n.s. 1, 1957, pp. 289–295. For Bulgaria, Z. Vuzharova, *Slavjiani i Prabylgari pa dannii na nekropolite ot VI–XI vv na teritorijata Bylgarija*, Sofia 1976. In Yugoslavia, V. Popović, "La descente des Koutrigours, des Slaves, et des Avars vers la mer Égée: Le témoignage de l'archéologie," *CRAI*, Paris 1978, pp. 596–648.

⁷See Weithmann, *op. cit.* (footnote 3 above), *passim*.

⁸N. Yalouris, Δελτ 16, 1960, B' [1962], pp. 125–126; Δελτ 17, 1961/2, B' [1963], p. 106, and especially pl. 117. *BCH* 84, 1960, p. 720, and *BCH* 85, 1961, p. 722.

⁹Nestor, the excavator of the largest of the early Slavic cemeteries, had on the basis of style dated the pottery of the Olympic site to the 7th century (communicated to me by Popović and so recorded in his study cited above [footnote 6], p. 636, note 156). It would seem premature to date such pottery on the basis of style. The well-known text from the Epitomator of Strabo, C. Müller (*Geographi graeci minores* II, p. 583, §21), gives literary evidence for Olympia which complements Yalouris' finds.

Ἄντι Σαλμωνεὺς, Οἰνόμαος, Πέλοψ καὶ οἱ Πελοπίδαι ἐν Πίσῃ κατῶκουν, ἣ
νῦν Βίσα καλεῖται. Νῦν δὲ οὐδὲ ὄνομά ἐστι Πισατῶν καὶ Καυκῶνων καὶ
Πυλίων ἅπαντα γὰρ ταῦτα Σκύθαι νέμονται.

¹⁰G. Daux, "Rapport sur les travaux de l'École Française en Grèce en 1976," *BCH* 101, 1977, p. 669. A detailed study of this find by P. A. Yannopoulos has now appeared; see footnote 38 below. It is certainly a crucial piece of archaeological evidence when one considers the contents of the *Chronicle of Monemvasia*. Written between the 9th and 11th centuries (806–1082/3), this states that the Avars invaded and held the Peloponnese from the sixth year of the reign of Maurice until the fourth year of the reign of Nicephorus I, from 587/8 to 804/5. P. Lemerle, "La chronique improprement dite de Monemvasie. Le contexte historique et légendaire," *REByz* 21, 1963, pp. 5–49. See Charanis, *op. cit.* [footnote 3 above], for further bibliography.

¹¹G. D. Weinberg, "A Wandering Soldier's Grave in Corinth," *Hesperia* 43, 1974, p. 515.

tices. Toponymy and linguistics are the two remaining branches of science which furnish us with sources, additional to those forthcoming from texts and archaeology, in the effort to elucidate the impact of the Slavic invasions on the society of mediaeval Greece.¹²

Within this larger and complex historical problem I have chosen a key historical event, the first major Slavic attack on the city of Thessaloniki, principally because the dating of the event is still disputed. The date, set by some in 586 and by others in 597, is in itself of some importance. The choice between the two alternatives arises from the unique source which mentions it, the *Miracula of St. Demetrius*, patron saint of Thessaloniki.¹³ This portion of the *Miracula* was recorded by John, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, who was an eyewitness to the siege and who tells us that the pending arrival of the Avaro-Slavic army was announced to the city's inhabitants on a Sunday, September 22, in the reign of Maurice "of blessed memory." A reckoning has shown that September 22 in the reign of Maurice could have fallen on a Sunday only in 586 or in 597.¹⁴ The event is important, however, for a second reason, inasmuch as it tells us something about the evolution of Slavic society during the course of the 6th century and after a considerable contact, albeit hostile, with Byzantine society. Let us turn to the *Miracula of St. Demetrius* and examine what its author has to say about the first major Avaro-Slavic attack on the city of Thessaloniki.

It is said that the chief of the Avars at that time desired something and that he sent ambassadors to Maurice, of blessed memory, who held the scepter of the Romans at that time. As he failed to obtain his petition and was consumed by unbounded rage and unable to do anything to him who had ignored him, he devised a manner by which especially he reckoned to afflict him greatly Having ascertained that the metropolis of Thessaloniki, guarded by God, greatly surpassed every city in Thrace and in all of Illyricum as to variety of wealth and as to distinguished, intelligent and most Christian population; and to speak simply, knowing that the aforementioned metropolis lies in the heart of the emperor because it shines forth through its virtues and knowing that if it should suffer something unexpected, that he would afflict the crowned emperor no less than would the slaughter of children; he therefore summoned to himself the entire beastly nation of

¹²M. Vasmer, "Die Slaven in Griechenland," *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Jahrgang 1941* (Phil.-hist. Klasse) XII, Berlin 1941.

¹³The edition of the text used here is that of P. Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils des miracles de Saint Démétrius*, I, *Le Texte*, Paris 1979. The older editions are those of A. Tougaard, *De l'histoire profane dans les actes grecs des Bollandistes*, Paris 1874, and that in vol. 116 of the *Patrologia Graeca*, Migne, ed. For its historical importance and its composition, see Lemerle, "La composition et la chronologie des deux premiers livres des *Miracula S. Demetrii*," *BZ* 46, 1953, pp. 349–361.

¹⁴Barišić (*op. cit.* [footnote 3 above], pp. 22–23) has accepted 586 as the date of the first major Avaro-Slavic attack on the city on the grounds that the Slavs continued southward and westward, after the failure to take the city, and then invaded the Peloponnese, as is mentioned by the *Chronicle of Monemvasia*, in the sixth year of the reign of Maurice, 587/8. In greater detail see his *Chuda Dimitrija Solunskog kao istoriski izvori*, Belgrade 1953, pp. 56–64. M. Nystazopoulou, "Συμβολή εις τήν χρονολόγησιν τῶν Ἀβαρικῶν καὶ Σλαβικῶν ἐπιδρομῶν, ἐπὶ Μαυρικίου (582–602) (μετ' ἐπιμέτρου περὶ τῶν περσικῶν πολέμων)," *Σύμμεικτα* 2, 1970, p. 173, and Lemerle, "La composition . . .," p. 354, set the date at 597 on the basis of the mention of the Thessalonian archbishop Eusebius. Since the latter is mentioned in the papal correspondence between 597 and 603 there was a greater probability that the attack occurred in 597.

the Sklavenoi, for the entire nation was subject to him, also adding to them certain other barbarians, and ordered them all to march against Thessaloniki, guarded by God.

And this army was the largest, O beloved, which was seen in our times. Some thought them to number more than 100,000 armed men, others thought fewer and others many more. As the truth could not be established because of the multitude, the opinions were divided. We saw it to be a new army of Xerxes, or that of the Ethiopians and Libyans which was formerly armed against the Jews. We heard that rivers and springs were dried up when the enemy were encamped near by them, and all the earth through which they passed they rendered a plain of desolation according to the prophet.¹⁵

Though one cannot rely on the numerical accuracy of such figures the entire narrative leaves us to understand that it was a major military undertaking which faced the Thessalonians. Aside from the figures quoted, the author relates that it was the largest army seen in his times, and he gives a graphic description of the desolation which the Avaro-Slavic army wreaked in its attempt to find provisions in the environs of the city.¹⁶ Further, it was the first time that the city's inhabitants had seen the armies of the barbarians.¹⁷ The inhabitants despaired of their salvation, for not only was the barbarian army large but the numbers of the inhabitants of Thessaloniki had greatly diminished as a result of the plague (which had lasted until the previous July); many of the Thessalonians were outside the city's walls tending their fields, and the army and officials were for the most part away.¹⁸ Most frightful, however, was the sight of the numerous siege machines which the invaders constructed on the fields in front of the city.¹⁹ The description of the poliorcetic weaponry among the Avaro-Slavs during this first siege is of particular interest to our theme and I shall henceforth concentrate on this portion of the *Miracula*. John relates that he was an eyewitness to the events and that he is relating only those things which he himself actually saw.²⁰ He gives a very detailed description of the Avaro-Slavs and the siege.

¹⁵Saint Demetrius, p. 134. There had been another smaller attack on the city by 5,000 Slavs, which probably preceded this major attack.

¹⁶Saint Demetrius, p. 148.

Καὶ ταῦτα μὲν συνέβη γενέσθαι εἰς ὕστερον. Τότε δὲ αὐτῆς ἡμέρας ἐλθόντων αὐτῶν περὶ τὰ ἔξω, ἀπησχολήθησαν συναρόντες βρώματα καὶ αἰχμαλώτους καὶ χρήματα· καὶ παμπόλλου σίτου καὶ ἄλλων καρπῶν ὑπ' αὐτῶν ληφθέντων—ἅπαντα γὰρ τότε τὰ γεωργηθέντα καὶ προτέρων ἐτῶν ἀπόθετα ἔξω ἐτύχανον—μόλις αὐτοῖς τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην ἐπήρκεσαν καὶ τῆ ἐπαύριον μέχρις ἀρίστου. Μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα τοὺς καρποὺς τῶν δένδρων καὶ τοὺς ὄρπηκας καὶ τὰς ρίζας αὐτῶν τε καὶ λαχάνων πάντων, εἶτα τὴν ἡμέρον χλόην καὶ τὰς ἀγριοβλάστους βοτάνας καὶ τοὺς καλουμένους χλωροὺς ἀκάνας, καὶ αὐτὸν λοιπὸν τὸν χοῦν τῆς γῆς κατεδάρδαψαν, καὶ ἔτι ἐλίμωττον, οὐχ ὑπομενούσης τῆς γῆς τὸ βάρος αὐτῶν, καθὼς γέγραπται.

¹⁷Saint Demetrius, p. 136.

Τὸν δὲ ἄφατον φόβον τῆ πόλει τότε περιεποίησε, καὶ τὸ πρώτως ἰδεῖν φάλαγγα βαρβαρικὴν.

¹⁸Saint Demetrius, p. 137.

¹⁹They had done this after their initial attempt to storm the walls by the use of ladders had failed (Saint Demetrius, p. 135), due to the intervention of the saint himself.

²⁰Saint Demetrius, pp. 151–152.

Ἄ δὲ αὐτοψεῖ κατεῖδον καὶ ταῖς χερσὶν ἐψηλάφησα κατὰ τὸ ἀνατολικὸν τῆς πόλεως μέρος ἔκ τε τῶν πολεμίων γεγενημένα καὶ ὑπὸ μόνου θεοῦ διασκεδασθέντα, καὶ ταῦτα μερικῶς καὶ συντημητικῶς διηγῆσομαι . . .

Then we heard noises from all around throughout the whole night. And on the following day, they prepared siege machines, iron battering rams, catapults for throwing stones of enormous size, and the so-called tortoises, onto which, along with the catapults, they placed dry skins, again having devised so that they might not be harmed by fire or boiling pitch. They nailed bloodied hides of newly slain oxen and camels onto these machines and they thus brought them up near to the wall. From the third day, and thereafter, they hurled stones, or rather mountains as they were in size, and the archers shot further, imitating the winter snowflakes, with the result that no one on the wall was able to emerge without danger and thus to see something outside. The tortoises were joined to the wall outside and without restraint were digging up the foundations with levers and axheads. I think that these numbered more than one thousand.²¹

It is clear from the text that the Avaro-Slavic army disposed of a formidable array of *ἐλεπόλεις*, *κριοί*, *χελῶναι* and *πετροβόλοι*, and John tells us that they would have succeeded in battering down the walls had it not been for God and St. Demetrius who intervened to destroy many of the machines.

We have already said that on the first day of the siege and on the second the enemies gathered for themselves foodstuffs and that they prepared many various, frightful machines on the third day and up to the seventh (for the most glorious martyr did not allow them to besiege the city beyond this). All together they brought up to the walls everything, the siege machines, the battering rams and the ballistae and the ground-creeeping tortoises with their digging. They first prepared the armored ram against the so-called gate of Cassandra. As they saw on the gate, suspended by the inhabitants of the city, some grappling hook of iron, short, unremarkable and hanging like a child's hobgoblin, they were seized by fear, and despising the ram they withdrew to their tents on the same day, having burned the ram and the others similar to it.

Now did the military force of the city accomplish this or generally was it that of God, which can frighten even the bold like children? Then with the hide-bearing tortoises going underneath, like terrifying serpents, they attempted, as was said, to undermine the outer wall from its foundations with axes and levers. This plan they would have accomplished if again the heavenly shining providence had not armed the hearts of the defenders with courage and enjoined them to go out against the outside wall and to frighten those who had already dug up most of it. For there was nothing to throw down on the enemy from above as the latter entered inside, as they would be sheltered by the outside wall and would in no way be seen by those above.

Then armed men, few in number, of whom God had heightened the eagerness, went out through the gate of which the so-called portcullis had become loose; they then raised it and merely by going up before the outer wall filled the enemy with amazement. The enemy, seized by unspeakable fear, abandoned all those machines situated before the outer wall for the purpose

²¹Saint Demetrius, pp. 148–149.

Ἐἶτα καὶ ψόφους κυκλόθεν ἠκούμεν δι' ὅλης νυκτὸς καὶ τῇ επαύριον, κατασκευαζόντων αὐτῶν ἐλεπόλεις καὶ κριοὺς σιδηροῦς καὶ πετροβόλους ὑπερμεγέθεις, καὶ τὰς καλουμένας χελῶνας, ἄστινας σὺν τοῖς πετροβόλοις δέρρουν ἐπισκεπάσαντες ξηραῖς, μεταβουλευσάμενοι πάλιν διὰ τὸ μὴ ὑπὸ πυρὸς ἢ πίσης καχλαζούσης ἀδικεῖσθαι, δέρρεις νεοσφαγῶν βοῶν καὶ καμήλων ἡμαγμένας ἔτι τοῖς ὀργάνοις ἐκείνοις ἐνήλωσαν. Καὶ οὕτω ταῦτα πλησίον τοῦ τείχους προσάγοντες, ἀπὸ τῆς τρίτης ἡμέρας καὶ ἐπέκεινα ἔβαλλον λίθοις, μᾶλλον δὲ βουνοῖς τῷ μεγέθει τυγχάνουσι, καὶ βέλεσι λοιπὸν οἱ τοξόται αὐτῶν νιφάδας μιμουμένοις χειμερινάς, ὡς μὴ τινα τῶν ἐν τῷ τείχει δύνασθαι καὶ προκύναι ἀκινδύνως καὶ τι τῶν ἔξω θεάσασθαι· ἀλλὰ καὶ ταῖς χελῶναις τῷ ἔξω τείχει προσφύντες, μοχλοῖς καὶ ἀξίνοις ἀμέτρως περιετίτρων αὐτοῦ τὰ θεμέλια· ἦσαν γὰρ αὐταὶ τῶν χιλίων πλείους οἶμαι τῷ ἀριθμῷ.

of mining, and they fled, although those who had sallied out against them had in their hands only spears and shields. Nor were columns hurled down, as you know, on the tortoises as they had been covered with the hides of freshly slain oxen and camels, nor did they pour down boiling pitch because the wetness of the hides made it impossible to do harm, neither could the small numbers of men, armed only by bows and spears²²

According to the *Miracula* St. Demetrius had caused the Avaro-Slavs to abandon their battering rams and then their tortoises, there remaining now only the ballistae.

These were tetragonal and rested on broader bases, tapering to narrower extremities. Attached to them were thick cylinders well clad in iron at the ends, and there were nailed to them timbers like beams from a large house. These timbers had the slings hung from the back side and from the front strong ropes, by which, pulling down and releasing the sling, they propel the stones up high and with a loud noise. And on being fired they sent up many great stones so that neither earth nor human constructions could bear the impacts. They also covered those tetragonal ballistae with boards on three sides only, so that those inside firing them might not be wounded with arrows by those on the walls. And since one of these, with its boards, had been burned to a char by a flaming arrow, they returned, carrying away the machines. On the following day they again brought these ballistae covered with freshly skinned hides and with the boards, and placing them closer to the walls, shooting, they hurled mountains and hills against us. For what else might one term these extremely large stones?²³

Though the Avaro-Slavs ultimately failed to take the city, the danger had been great. What is of particular interest is the ability of the Avaro-Slavs to build and equip themselves with siege machinery traditionally belonging to Byzantine military science and tactics, that is, with 1,000 tortoises, an unspecified number of battering rams, and with a comparatively large number of ballistae (50 along the city's eastern walls). The text is specific about the fact that these were built after the arrival of the barbarian army before the walls of Thessaloniki and so were built by the barbarians themselves.

When did the Avaro-Slavs acquire the poliorcetic technology necessary for military success against the fortified Byzantine cities? An examination of the earliest Byzantine

²²Saint Demetrius, pp. 152–153.

²³Saint Demetrius, p. 154. John writes:

Ἐπεὶ ποία στερρότης ἀνθρωπίνῃ οὐ κατέπτηχε καὶ κατενεκροῦτο τῇ θέᾳ τῆς πετροβόλου
χαλάξης ἐκείνης καὶ τῷ ἀστέκτῳ ρόζῳ τῆς χειροποιήτου βροντῆς

The defenders devised a method of halting the fury and force of the missiles. They suspended, from the parapets and on thin rods, cloth curtains and mattresses (St. Demetrius, pp. 154–155). The attack was thwarted, but the danger had been extreme. One missile, which actually struck the walls, demolished a substantial part of them. There were some fifty of these catapults along the eastern walls of the city. Lemerle (*Les plus anciens recueils des Miracles de Saint Démétrius*, II, *Commentaire*, Paris 1981, p. 54, note 65, 96ff.) has discredited the section of John's account of the siege that deals with the siege weaponry, but he does not do so with sufficient scholarly justification. Now the historical reliability of the *Miracula* in the first instance rests on the fact that John is reporting what he himself had seen. This is the premise on which scholars, including Lemerle himself, have evaluated and utilized his account as historical. In this section John states specifically that he is going to report only that which he himself had seen, to wit, on the eastern walls. Further, his detailed description of the *petroboles* is specific and detailed, hardly the product of rhetorical exercise or imagination. Finally, we know from Theophylactus Simocatta that the Avaro-Slavs acquired the knowledge of this machinery only in 587 and began to take cities in the interim between 587 and 597 with siege machinery.

texts that describe the Avaro-Slavs indicates that these latter possessed no advanced siege technology when they first appeared in the Balkans in the 6th century. Our primary written sources for the state of Slavic society in the 6th century are three: Procopius, the so-called *Strategicon* of Maurice, and Theophylactus Simocatta. Specific studies have shown that the pieces in Procopius and the *Strategicon* describing the early Slavic society are not simply archaistic rhetorical exercises consisting largely of meaningless *τόποι κοινοί*, but are actually accurate reflections of Slavic society at that point in time when the Byzantines first came in contact with it.²⁴ Theophylactus Simocatta is a rich source, reliable, with specific details, and tends to confirm the picture presented of early society in both Procopius and the *Strategicon*. In fact, however, any discussion of early Slavic society must begin with Procopius.

These barbarian nations, the Sklavenoi and Antae, are not ruled by one man, but live from of old in "democracy" and because of this they always manage their profitable and difficult affairs in common. Similarly, all other matters, so to speak, are common to each of them and were handled according to custom by these same barbarians. They believe there is one god, that of lightning, creator of all; they believe him to be sole lord, and they sacrifice oxen and all sacrificial animals to him. They neither acknowledge fate nor that it has some decisive influence in human affairs. Whenever death is already close to them, or they are seized by illness, or they are arrayed for battle, they promise, if they escape, to make a sacrifice immediately in return for their life. When they have escaped they sacrifice that which they promised and think that the salvation was purchased for them with this sacrifice. Moreover they revere both rivers and nymphs and some other daemons, and they sacrifice to all of them. They carry out their divinations in these sacrifices. They dwell in pitiful huts, living far from one another, changing frequently all, and each severally, the location of habitation. Arrayed for battle the majority advance on foot against the enemies, with small shields and javelins, nor do they in any way don corselets. Some have neither a chiton nor a short cloak, but having put on only trousers up to and including the genitals, they are thus arrayed for a clash with enemies. And there is, simply, one barbarian language for each of the two nations.

They do not differ even in shape from one another. All are particularly tall and stout; their bodies and hair are neither very white nor blond nor are they very dark, but all are ruddy. Just as the Massagetae so they also have a harsh and careless way of life, and just as the Massagetae, they are full of filth. They are rarely knavish or base, even maintaining the Hunnic characteristic of simplicity. In past times the Sklavenoi and Antae had one name. In former times they called both Sporoi because, I think, they inhabit the land scattered about sporadically. Thus they have much land. They inhabit the greater part of the other bank of the Ister. And as regards this people it is thus.²⁵

Procopius' description is one of a people with a poorly developed military technology. They are very lightly armed and there is no mention of siege machinery.

The remaining accounts in Procopius which deal with Slavic military technology are consistent with this initial impression that he conveys. The Slavs seem to have contented themselves with raids for booty in the mid-6th century, always returning to their bases

²⁴See, above all, B. Zasterova, *Les avars et les slaves dans la Tactique de Maurice*, Prague 1971, and R. Benedicty, "Prokopios' Berichte über slavische Vorzeit. Beiträge zur historiographischen Methode des Prokopios von Kaisaricia," *JOBG* 14, 1965, pp. 51-78.

²⁵Procopius, *de bello gothico*, III.14.22-30.

north of the Danube.²⁶ The first fortresses which we know the Slavs captured were those of Illyricum in the year 547/8. In this raid, marked by extensive killing and enslavement, they were able to take walled fortresses that were empty of defenders.²⁷ In 549/50 another Slavic band crossed the Danube and, dividing into two sections, sacked the villages of Thrace and Illyricum, and in addition, “they both took many fortresses by siege, never having laid siege before.”²⁸ Procopius then follows the progress of one of these looting bands and describes how they took the town of Toperus on the Aegean.

They took it in the following manner. Most of them hid themselves in hilly country opposite the walls, and a few of them, going up before the eastern gates, annoyed the Romans on the parapets. The soldiers who were on guard there, thinking that they (Slavs) were no more numerous than those whom they saw, all immediately taking up their weapons, went out against them. The barbarians retreated, giving the appearance to their pursuers that they retreated out of fear. Those in ambush came out now, behind the pursuers, no longer allowing them entry into the city. Those who appeared to be fleeing now turned about and placed the Romans in a position of double attack. Having slain all of them, the barbarians attacked the wall. The inhabitants of the city, deprived of the soldiers, were at a great loss and defended themselves against the attackers with those that remained. First, heating oil and pitch, they poured it on the besiegers and, all of them hurling stones against them, came close to repulsing the danger. But then the barbarians, having driven them back from the parapets by a multitude of arrows and having placed ladders against the wall, took the city by storm. They slew all 15,000 men, plundered all the wealth, and enslaved all the women and children.²⁹

In the incidents set forth above, dated to 547/8 and 549/50, Procopius indicates that in the one case the Slavs were able to take walled fortresses when they were defenseless and that in the other they had to resort to ruse. They then utilized ladders, having swept the defenders from the parapets by a sustained archery attack. In no case does Procopius mention siege machinery.

The same picture emerges from an examination of the text of the *Strategicon* of Maurice, which describes a Slavic society still underdeveloped in the realm of siege technology:

Leading a life of banditry, they like to carry out undertakings against their enemies in the forests, passes, and precipitous regions. They utilize skillfully ambushes and surprise attacks and thefts, at night and in daytime, devising many methods. They are experienced beyond all men in the crossing of rivers and bravely endure in the waters. Often some of them, while in their own land, are surprised by trouble and, diving into the depth of the water, hold canes in their mouths, made long especially for this and hollowed throughout, reaching up to the surface of the water; lying on their backs in the deep, they breathe through them. And it is sufficient for many

²⁶ Procopius, *de bello gothico*, III.14.24–25.

²⁷ Procopius, *de bello gothico*, III.29.1–2.

... ἤδη δὲ καὶ φρούρια ἐνταῦθα πολλά τε καὶ δοκοῦντα ἐχυρὰ τὰ πρότερα εἶναι οὐδενὸς ἀμνημονίου ἐξελεῖν ἴσχυσαν . . .

²⁸ Procopius, *de bello gothico*, III.38.7. He qualifies this somewhat by a previous reference.

²⁹ Procopius, *de bello gothico*, III.3.9–19. The remainder of the passage is of great interest for the state of Slavic society.

hours, so that no suspicion of them arises. But even if it should transpire that the canes are seen from outside it is supposed by the inexperienced that they are one with the water. Wherefore those who are experienced in this, recognizing the cut and position of the cane, either stab their mouths with them or, taking them away, bring them up from the water as they are no longer able to remain in it.

They are armed with short javelins, two to a man, and some of them with stout shields that are cumbersome. They use wooden bows and short arrows smeared with a poisonous drug, and this kills if a man wounded by it is not safeguarded in time by a draught of antidote, by other aids known to the science of the doctors, or if the wound is not cut away immediately so that it does not spread to the rest of the body. Being without leadership and hating one another, they do not know order nor do they practice closed battle, nor do they appear in open and level places. Or, if it should happen to them to venture into an open clash, shouting, at the same time they advance a little. And if those opposed to them give in to their voice, they attack violently. But if not, at that same moment they turn, not attempting to test by hand the strength of their enemies; they flee toward the forests, having much success therefrom as knowing suitably how to battle in narrow places. Often when bearing booty, in the face of ordinary disturbance they disregard the booty and hasten into the forests, and while the attackers are roaming about the booty, they turn about and easily inflict damage upon them.³⁰

Again the description gives no indication of an advanced siege technique or even of military science. Whatever specific and inferential evidence we have for the 6th century is strongly indicative therefore of the fact that the Avaro-Slavs did not possess a developed poliorcetic technology. They were able to take walled towns and fortresses only by ruse, or when they were undefended, or when they were able to place their ladders on the walls themselves. There is not a word about battering rams, tortoises, or ballistae, only simple ladders.³¹

The testimony of Procopius and of the *Strategicon* of Maurice is specifically confirmed by Theophylactus Simocatta, historian of the crucial reign of Maurice (582–602), who tells us exactly when the Avaro-Slavs did acquire advanced siege technology. Though he relates that the barbarians did succeed in taking a number of towns and fortresses early in the reign of Maurice, there is no indication as to the manner by which they were reduced. But in the year 587³² the armies of the Chaqan appeared before the walled fortress of Appiareia in Moesia Inferior and besieged it. Theophylactus pauses at this point in his narrative to inform the reader that he is going to give extra details on this particular siege before going on to his regular discourse, for in his eyes the history of the siege of this fortress is important.

³⁰H. Mihaescu, *Mauricius. Arta militară*, Bucharest 1970, pp. 278, 280. The absence of any mention of siege machinery in these sections has implications for the dating of that portion of the *Strategicon*, or for its accuracy.

³¹Agathias, v.21.1, Keydell ed., does mention the fact that Zabergan's Cotrigurs had siege machines when they invaded the Thracian Chersonnese late in the reign of Justinian I:

... πολλάκις μὲν τῷ περιβόλῳ προσέβαλλον, κλίμακάς τε προσάγοντες καὶ τὰς μηχανὰς τὰς ἐλεπόλεις

But they were temporary interlopers, and the technology does not seem to have been passed on from them to the Avaro-Slavs.

³²Velkov, *Cities in Thrace* (footnote 2 above), pp. 55, 102.

There was a certain soldier, Bousas was his name, a good man in the line of battle and through the virtue of his soul more glorious than those others who exceed in valor and are brave, always seeking out danger ahead of them whenever he would hear the battle cry of the blaring bugle. At that time he dwelt in the fortress. Bousas decided to ride out to the meadows near by the fortress and then to go farther out where the hunting was better. The barbarians captured him, however, and thus the hunter became the object of the hunt. As they held him they threatened to strike him with his spear. He begged that they not do this and instead exchange his life for ransom, as the killing of Bousas would not profit the barbarians and they would thus forego brilliant gifts. The barbarians accepted the promise and did not reject the exchange. So they led the captive to the fortress and proclaimed to those in the fortification that they would slay Bousas before their eyes if they did not pay for him with gifts and such. Bousas entreated the Romans not to disregard him as he was swaying in the balance between salvation and death, and he beseeched them to weigh out grace for him. Loudly shouting and weeping, he was relating the brave deeds which he had attained through great dangers on behalf of the Romans, drawing up thus a catalogue of the struggles. And he displayed the struggles inscribed in the wounds of his body as reflections of the pains, and he bared more clearly the wounds inflicted by the enemies. In short, for all that he had suffered he hoped not to die, but to be rescued by those whose benefactor he had been. But the inhabitants were vexed, having been corrupted by a certain man who, according to censorious rumor, had secretly been intimate with the wife of Bousas. They sent away the barbarians disgraced. Now in greater danger, Bousas beseeched the barbarians to give him a short reprieve from death; as a price for this stay he would turn the fortress over to the barbarians. For he reckoned that those who were forgetful of gratitude should suffer first and should share first in the inhumanity of the tragedy in order that he might not suffer the evil first. When the enemy was given a greater promise they graciously became kinder. They guaranteed, under oath, to save Bousas, not to kill him, allowing him the power to die a natural death and allowing him to dissolve his bond whenever he should desire. And they would not apply to him this contrived and unnatural death if his promise should be made good. Indeed Bousas taught the Avars to construct a certain siege machine, for they (the Avars) happened to be most ignorant of such machines, and he built the siege engine to hurl missiles.³³ Soon thereafter the fortress was leveled, and Bousas collected judgment for their inhumanity, having taught the barbarians something frightful, the technology of besieging. Thence the enemy captured effortlessly a great many of the Roman cities by making use of this original device.³⁴

Our author is emphatic. Prior to the siege, the Avaro-Slavic army of the Chaqan had no knowledge of poliorcetic machinery: “. . . ἔτι τῶν τοιούτων ὀργάνων ἀμαθεστάτους ὑπάρχοντας.” After Bousas’ instruction as to how to construct a siege engine, ἐλέπολιν, the barbarians were able to capture effortlessly many Roman cities. The date of this occurrence, 587, is crucial, as we shall see.³⁵ Eight years later, in 595, there is evidence

³³Theophylactus Simocatta (De Boor, ed., here and *passim*), II.16.9–10:

. . . καὶ δῆτα ὁ Βουσαῖς τοὺς Ἀβάρους ἐδίδασκε συμπήγνυσθαι πολιορκητικὸν τι μηχανήμα ἔτι τῶν τοιούτων ὀργάνων ἀμαθεστάτους ὑπάρχοντας, ἀκροβολίζειν τε παρεσκευάζε τὴν ἐλέπολιν.

³⁴Theophylactus Simocatta, II.16.1–10. Kovačević, *op. cit.* (footnote 3 above), pp. 127–128. Zasterova, *op. cit.* (footnote 24 above), p. 72, no. 114.

³⁵Slavic military technology seems to have been developed primarily in the realm of riverine navigation and shipbuilding for riverine movement. When the Avar Chaqan decided to transport his armies across rivers he usually called out the Slavic carpenter-shipbuilders to construct the transport boats. Thus when the Chaqan declared war on the empire and decided to cross the Danube,

in Theophylactus that siege machinery had become a regular part of the Avaro-Slavic military apparatus and technique. In that year the Byzantine general Priscus was informed that the Chaqan had leveled the walls of Singidunum,³⁶ and had removed the population to his own territory. Soon after this episode the Chaqan assembled his army to march toward Dalmatia. En route he captured the city of Bonkeis and 40 fortifications by the use of siege machines.³⁷

The sum total of the literary evidence points to the following critical fact. When the Slavs and Avars first appear in the Balkans they do not possess the technology of advanced siege warfare. This is clear from both Procopius and the *Strategicon* of Maurice. Theophylactus confirms this in an unexpected but decisive manner. He pinpoints the moment in time and place when they acquired this technology: in 587, before the gates of Appiareia. From that time the Avaro-Slavic threat to urban centers and fortresses became much greater and no such establishment could henceforth rely exclusively on the strength of its walls for security.

The dating of the acquisition of poliorcetic technology among the Avaro-Slavs also has a bearing on the date of the first major Avaro-Slavic attack on Thessaloniki. The *Miracula* of St. Demetrius date the appearance of this army to Sunday, September 22, in the reign of Maurice, i.e. either in September of 586 or in September of 597. As we saw from the analysis of the *Miracula*, the army besieging Thessaloniki on Sunday, September 22, in the reign of Maurice, was fully possessed of a highly developed siege technology. According to Theophylactus, they began to apply this technology only in 587; therefore the evidence for dating the first major Avaro-Slavic attack on Thessaloniki in 597 rather than 586 is now much stronger. It is stronger because the author of this portion of the *Miracula* was an eyewitness to the events, and his description of the siege engines is very precise and realistic in detail.

καὶ οὖν ὁ Χαγάνος τοῖς Σκλαυηνοῖς προστάττει ἀκατίων πλήθη τεκταίνεσθαι, ὅπως πρὸς διάβασιν σχοίη τὸν Ἴστρον πειθήνιον. οἱ μὲν τῆς Σιγγιδόνης οἰκῆτορες ἀθρώαις ἐφόδοις τισὶ τῶν Σκλαυηνῶν τοὺς πόνους λήζονται καὶ πυρὶ παρεδίδουσαν τὰ πρὸς ναυτιλίαν τούτων ἐπιχειρα (Theophylactus Simocatta, vi.3.9).

As a result the inhabitants of Singidunum attacked the Slavs and burned the boats. Then the Chaqan moved on to Sirmium.

... καὶ οὖν ὁ Χαγάνος παρασάγγας ποιησάμενος πέντε στρατοπεδεύεται ἀνὰ τὸ Σίρμιον πλήθη τε Σκλαυηνῶν ξυλουργεῖν παρεσκεύαζεν, ὅπως τὸν ποταμὸν τὸν λεγόμενον Σάον ναυτιλλόμενος διανήξεται. οἱ μὲν οὖν πρὸς τὴν ἐπιστρατείαν ἠπέιγετο, οἱ δὲ σύνδρομον τῷ προστατάματι τὴν ναυτιλίαν παρείχοντο ... (Theophylactus Simocatta, vi.4.4).

The text of Theophylactus is replete with incidents reflecting the skills of the Slavs in riverine navigation and warfare. See for instance the case of Mousocius, a Slavic chieftain, who disposed of at least 150 monoxyles (Theophylactus Simocatta, vi.9.5–6).

³⁶Theophylactus Simocatta, vii.10.1.

³⁷Theophylactus Simocatta, vii.12.1.

... δεκάτη δὲ ἡμέρα, καὶ τὰς περὶ αὐτὸν δυνάμεις συναθροίσας ὁ βάρβαρος ἐπὶ τὸν Ἴόνιον κόλπον στρατεύει τὴν σάλπιγγα. περὶ τούτους τοὺς τόπους ἡ Δελματία χώρα καθέστηκεν. τοίνυν ἰκανοὺς χάρακας ὁ βάρβαρος ποιησάμενος εἰς τὰς λεγομένας Βόγκεις ἐχώρησεν, καὶ δὴ παραστησάμενος τὴν πόλιν τοῖς μηχανήμασι τεσσαράκοντα ἐξεπόρθησε φρούρια.

The dating of the first major attack on Thessaloniki has further implications for the Slavic invasions in Greece. Barišić, in his fundamental study, had attempted to connect the Avaro-Slavic army of this first major attack on Thessaloniki with the supposed entry of the Avars into the Peloponnese as narrated by the *Chronicle of Monemvasia* in 587/8. It is now fairly clear that there is no connection between the two notices in the written sources. The dating of the acquisition of siege technology also helps to date the contents of the *Strategicon* of Maurice pertaining to the Slavs and Avars. Inasmuch as this section contains no reference to siege machinery, it reflects a state of development prior to 587, the date when Bousas instructed them in these matters. Finally, our texts shed light on an important aspect of Slavic social development which resulted from Slavic contacts with Byzantine material culture.³⁸

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³⁸Since the preparation of this paper Supplement VI of the *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique, Études Argiennes*, 1980, has appeared. It contains the following three articles which are of primary interest to the present study. P. Yannopoulos, "La pénétration slave à Argos," pp. 323–372; P. Aupert, "Ceramique slave à Argos (585 ap. JC)," pp. 373–394; *idem*, "Objets de la vie quotidienne à Argos en 585 ap. JC," pp. 395ff.

Yannopoulos in a very thorough and important review of the primary sources, secondary literature, numismatic and archaeological evidence comes to the conclusion that the first major attack on Thessaloniki by the Avaro-Slavs could not have occurred in 597 but must have transpired in 586 (pp. 339, 359, 364). He suggests that they took Argos in 585 and relinquished it to Byzantine forces in 586 (p. 368). Though he notes (p. 361) that in the *Miracula* the Avaro-Slavs appear before Thessaloniki well armed, he does not take into account the dating of the Avaro-Slavic acquisition of poliorcetic technology. The study of Aupert on the Slavic ceramics found at Bath A is of the first order of importance.