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Nikopolis and the Roman Defense of Epirus

The amount of data, either documentary or archaeological, bearing on the late Roman period in Epeiros is quite meager. Professors Chrysos and Soustal have within the last several years presented such historical and archaeological evidence as does exist. Because of the present state of our knowledge with regard to the late Roman period in Epeiros, this paper will not propose any far-reaching conclusions but rather will make a few tentative and impressionistic suggestions with regard to the parameters surrounding the late Roman defense of the province.

The overwhelmingly rural character of Epirote society was a major determining factor in the history and development of the province in the late Roman period. The massive depopulation of the central upland basins after the Roman conquest in the second century B.C. along with subsequent Roman activities in the region seem to have played a decisive role in opening the valleys and basins of Epirus to the extensive herding operations for which the province would be famous during the Principate. At the same time, the existence of such a dominant urban center as Nikopolis seems to have had a persistent retardative effect upon the development of other urban centers, particularly in present day southern Epeiros.

According to Strabo, the province was especially noteworthy because of its lack of cities; villages and ruins dominated the Epirote countryside. Herding was the predominant economic activity of the region. Once herding was established as the dominant economic pattern, it tended to retard extensive urban development and fixed a rural character upon the province. The antiquarian treatise of Stephanus of Byzantium captures the rural character of Roman Epirus with his references to fewer than a dozen cities in Epirus. Epirus vetus was therefore a predominantly rural society of small villages and herding communities.

By the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., some of the overwhelmingly rural character of the province in the time of Strabo had been ameliorated. At a local synod in 457/458, the Epirote mainland had seven bishoprics in addition to the metropolitan see at Nikopolis. In the early sixth century, Hierokles listed eleven cities within Epirus vetus of which nine were on the mainland. Nevertheless, the number of cities remained small on the eve of the great barbarian invasions.

The locational pattern of the Epirote cities in the fifth and sixth centuries reflects the character of late Roman society in Epirus vetus. Four of the cities, including Nikopolis, were on the western coastal plains while five were located in

the interior. The islands of Kerkyra and Ithaca each contained one city. The three coastal cities other than Nikopolis were all located in close proximity of each other on the northern coast. The larger river valleys and the lacustrine basins of the interior of the province accounted for all of the remaining mainland cities known from documentary sources as well as those from archaeological investigations. In addition to the historically recorded cities of the interior, several more cities of the late Roman period can be added on the basis of archaeological research. The pattern of urban settlement which emerges indicates the presence of at least one urban center in each of the major interior valleys and basins, which were well placed to exploit the local herding and agricultural resources. The sphere of economic influence of Nikopolis can be seen in the absence of urban centers in present day southern Epeiros with the exception of Arta which appears to have maintained a diminished existence under the shadow of Nikopolis. Despite the existence of these mainland cities in the fifth and sixth centuries, Epeiros remained essentially a region of rural villages and herding communities. The character of Epirote society and settlement patterns established the parameters for the late Roman defense of the province. The trajectory and nature of the barbarian invasions served as the other determining factor.

Epirus vetus appears to have been spared from the Gothic invasions of the third century which devastated much of the rest of peninsular Greece. During the next wave of attacks in the late fourth/early fifth century, the province did not escape as lightly. The Visigoths under Alaric were permitted to settle in Roman Epirus. Though we are not told in which part of the region, it seems unlikely that the Visigoths would have allowed themselves to have been rusticated in Epirus vetus but rather that they merely traversed the province en route to Epirus nova. Following this brief flurry of activity, Epirus vetus remained outside of the mainstream of recorded events for nearly half a century; only the onset of the Vandalic naval raids in the central Mediterranean changed the situation.

Shortly after the death of the Emperor Valentinian III, the Vandals plundered Dalmatia, Epirus and Hellas. They returned periodically over the next twenty years to raid the western coast and islands of Illyricum. However, in 474, the Vandals captured and briefly held Nikopolis as a bargaining point to strengthen their negotiating position with the Emperor Zeno. The capture of Nikopolis emphasized the defensive weaknesses not only of the provincial capital but also of the entire province of Epirus vetus. Nearly half a century would pass before the province was again the object of a foreign attack. Epirus vetus was a victim of the barbarian invasion of 517 which affected the whole of northern peninsular Greece. A comparison of the local synodical list of 457/458 and the Synkedemos of Hierokles (ca. 526) shows that the cities of Epirus survived the vicissitudes of the second half of the fifth century and the first quarter of the sixth century without fatal consequences.

All of the meager evidence, which is available, seems to indicate that the Imperial government ignored the defences of the province which was treated as strategically peripheral. Only in the reigns of Anastasius or Justinian did the East Roman government begin to give any attention to the organization of defenses in Epirus vetus. According to Procopius, Justinian ordered the fortification of interior Illyricum in the aftermath of the devastating barbarian attacks of 539/540. Current archaeological estimations indicate that some of these endeavors were at least initiated if not concluded by the Emperor Anastasius.

The interplay of topographic, strategic and socio-economic parameters determined the nature of the late Roman defensive program in Epirus vetus. In particular, the paucity of cities and the overwhelmingly pastoral economy effected the character and the extent of the efforts. Few major new fortifications seem to have been undertaken, the exception being the new walled site for Euroia. For the cities of Phoinike and Photike, new forts were constructed as citadels on nearby steep ground; the cities themselves were not fortified due to engineering difficulties. At Nikopolis the walls of the city were restored. In addition to these sites, Procopius lists twelve newly constructed and twenty - three restored forts. In Epirus vetus as in most of the rest of interior Illyricum, new constructions seem to have been kept to a minimum. It was easier and cheaper to reuse a site or to strengthen existing walls than to begin afresh on a new site.

Central supervision of the refortification of Epirus vetus seems to have been minimal, due to the lack of critical strategic significance and economic importance of the province. As elsewhere in the late Roman Empire, the local aristocrats seem to have taken provincial defence into their own hands. An excellent example of such local self-help which might have greatly influenced the aristocrats of Illyricum could be found in the autonomous regime of Count Marcellinus in the region just to the north of Epeiros. The simple inability or unwillingness of the Roman government to provide elemental order and security in the provinces compelled the local aristocrats throughout Illyricum to depend upon their own resources for local defence. Such endeavors were often detrimental to public order and in defiance of Imperial laws but, nonetheless, filled a vacuum left by the central government itself. While the government could not countenance the intimidation of its tax collectors by the private armies of the land owners, it was willing to throw onto their shoulders the costly and dirty task of rooting out brigandage which was threatening to become entrenched in the provinces. If the private armies of the provincial magnates could be used against brigands, it was but a small step to leave the responsibility for local defence in the hands of these same magnates.

In Epirus vetus as in the rest of Illyricum, the local aristocracy was already responsible from the early fifth century for the good repair of the walls of cities and towns. It seems likely from the extent and nature of the Justinianic program that most of the fortifications were constructed through local initiative. What then were

the results in Epirus vetus of late Roman initiatives.

The major cities as well as the major fortifications were distributed asymetrically on the northern and central parts of the coastal littoral, as well as in the major interior river drainages and lacustrine basins. Nikopolis which was the only other major coastal city dominated the whole of present day southern Epirus and northern Akarnania. The city's position along the coastal road and at the mouth of the Ambracian Gulf as well as its political and economic status within the province are indicated by the massiveness of its late Roman fortifications. The major interior regions of Epirus were dominated by one or more urban centers, at least one of which was fortified or refortified in the late Roman period. Some of these are known directly from the Procopian lists and others are known from archaeological endeavors; some of the latter probably reflect at least a few of the obscure toponyms of the *De Aedificiis*. Most of the fortifications which Justinian was alleged to have had constructed in Epirus vetus were probably not associated with any major settlements of the time but rather were forts to provide places of refuge for the local population. Such minimalist constructions were in fact not ill-adapted to the rural character of a province which had been and probably still was much more famous for its herds than for its urban life. A liberal distribution of small forts in the river valleys and lacustrine basins would have served to provide at least minimal protection to a dispersed rural population whose principal wealth lay in their livestock. Partially collapsed Hellenistic encientes would have been particularly adaptable for reutilization and could easily have been restored to a sufficient strength to repeal all but the most determined and sustained barbarian attacks. The pre-existence of numerous constructions in stone as well as the parsimony of the Roman government encouraged this rebuilding of fortifications.

Most of the fortifications of the late Roman period in Epirus vetus have not yet been located and fewer still have been specifically identified as those listed by Procopius. Consequently, it is at present impossible to discuss the probabilities of an integrated provincial or diocesan defense of the province. The circumstances under which most of the forts were constructed or restored and the brevity of their utilization would probably indicate that many of these fortifications have either disappeared or will be difficult to identify as being from the fifth or sixth centuries. Nonetheless, as preliminary archaeological assessments have demonstrated, it seems reasonable to assume that each substantial valley or basin in Epirus vetus contains one or more of these fortifications.

In their first test, the late Roman defenses appear to have withstood the challenge of the Ostrogothic invasion of 551. The disaster which had struck Epirus vetus during the Vandal attack in 474 was not repeated. Still the weakness of the late Roman defensive system was amply demonstrated. The provincial authorities were unable to organize any military response to the raid much less prevent the Ostrogothic rampage through several of the richest parts of Epirus vetus. Diocesan

or prefectural responses were equally absent. In the long run, this passiveness and neglect would cause the collapse of Roman rule and much of Roman life throughout most of Epirus vetus.

During the 580s, the Avars and Slavs sacked towns and countryside in every part of peninsular Greece and forced a considerable exodus of the local population to places of refuge. The initial stages of this depopulation are reflected in an incident on the island of Kerkyra in the early seventh century. A dispute over episcopal jurisdiction at the town of Kassiope arose between the bishop of Kerkyra and the refugee bishop of Euroia who was residing at Kassiope on the hospitality of the bishop of Kerkyra. Sometime before this episode, the bishop of Euroia had fled his own episcopal see with his clergy and the relics of Hagios Donatos, the patron of the city. The flight of the bishop, particularly with the relics would seem to indicate that Euroia, which had been transferred to a new fortified location barely a half a century earlier, had fallen to the barbarians or was in serious danger of being overwhelmed.

By the end of the first quarter of the seventh century, most of Epirus had been abandoned to the Slavic invaders. According to the *Miracula* of St. Demetrios, Slavic raids had depopulated most of the cities and provinces of Illyricum including Epirus vetus around the year 615. Little if any assistance was given the Epirotes by the Imperial government. The Epirotes were forced to depend upon their own resources with little or no hope of aid from the central government, an all too familiar situation in the late Roman period. The population of Epirus vetus did have the late Roman fortifications for their defense but the local defense of isolated fortifications proved unable to withstand the impetus of the Slavic migrations. As a consequence, the Greco-Roman inhabitants of the interior of Epirus vetus probably followed the example of the bishop of Euroia and fled to the Ionian islands or else to the protection of Nikopolis whose walls and coastal location made possible at least the temporary survival of the city.

One century after Hierokles produced the *Synkedemos*, Pope Honorius wrote to the only four bishops of Epirus besides the metropolitan of Nikopolis. Three of the four the bishops appear to have been refugees imposing upon the hospitality of the fourth who was the bishop of Kerkyra. Thus, Kerkyra and Nikopolis weathered the devastation and displacements of the late sixth and early seventh century but little else did in Epirus vetus.