

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

‘Beginnings’, wrote Teilhard de Chardin, ‘have an irritating but essential fragility.’¹ Only rarely can we put our finger on that precise moment and place which marks a fundamental change, whether material or spiritual. The very nature of human tradition is unfavourable to such precision. Long after the event those who look back may attempt to recover and put on record the point which separates the old from the new. But their record is bound to be a gross approximation. In tracing in the following pages such a momentous new departure among the various Slav peoples we shall be obliged to admit again and again that the true beginning is beyond our ken.

No sooner did the recurrent disasters which overtook the Roman Empire at the hands of migrating Germanic peoples seem to be coming to an end than it was realised that other peoples were ready and waiting to follow in their wake. The Slavs, from their homelands north of the Carpathian chain, had been expanding not only eastwards and westwards across the North European plain but also southwards, following the lowlands of the Black Sea coast and filtering through the mountain chain into the Central European basin. The Danube was still accounted the frontier of the civilised world. In the fifth century A.D. the main power beyond that frontier had been the Huns. Attila held sway over many Germanic tribes in the Danube basin and no doubt over some Slavs also, but the latter did not yet stand out prominently.² Only after his death in 453 and the rapid decline of Hunnish power did the Slavs become a dominant factor in Byzantine frontier affairs under their own names. Theoderic and his Goths moved out of the Balkans into Italy in 488; by the year 500 Slavs were already massed on the left bank of the lower Danube. Their most widespread ethnic designation—*Slověne*—was taken over into both Greek and Latin, more or less contemporaneously, on the Danube frontier.³

In the West the stable frontier lay along the Rhine. But the right bank was still solidly Germanic; there was consequently no direct Slav pressure on the settled lands until the Frankish world had itself found its feet and integrated these remaining barbarian cousins into their own adopted civilisation.

It will be appropriate, therefore, to consider first the Byzantine

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The entry of the Slavs into Christendom

reaction to direct Slav pressure, then the history of the Slavs on the fringes of the Germanic world and finally to return to examine the later history of the Balkans and of the Slavs who lived furthest east in Russia.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

THE SLAVS IN THE
BYZANTINE EMPIRE¹

The Slav invasion and settlement of the Balkans can be divided into three phases. During the first, covering the first half of the sixth century, the Slavs were still based north of the Danube but kept up a constant pressure of raids across the river, which yielded them plunder, slaves, and bribes to remove themselves. They were behaving much as other barbarian peoples before them and the Byzantine authorities reacted predictably. There were as yet few attempts to make permanent lodgements south of the Danube. The events of this half-century are treated in Prokopios's *Gothic War*.² A few landmarks must suffice here. The wide-ranging movements of the Getae in the North Balkans from 517 may have brought Slavs in as contingents in their armies. Prokopios alludes to a large-scale Slav raid on Thrace about 527.³ In the 530s there were further substantial incursions and in the 540s massive raids, which at one moment menaced Constantinople itself. In 547–8 a great offensive reached the Adriatic coast and devastated Dyrrachium (Durazzo). In the 550s the Imperial City was again menaced; this time the Slavs were strengthened by Kutrigur Turks.

As usual, the Empire made some attempt to tame the barbarians by attracting them as mercenary contingents into its armies and employing them on other war fronts: as early as 536–7 we find a record of such Slav mercenaries fighting against the Ostrogoths in Italy.⁴ This was an important method of rapid if superficial civilisation,^a and though the barbarian military units might remain pagan as long as they preserved their unity, they saw the civilised world and gained some inkling of Christianity, while some of their officers were soon converted as a necessary step in their careers. Germanic barbarians had done exactly the same.

Such acts of ambitious individuals had naturally no effect on the main mass of the Slavs still outside the Empire. The first steps towards general

^a It is probable that some of the earliest Latin loanwords in Slav are due to these mercenaries since Latin was the language of the Byzantine army down to and including Justinian's time. *Cēsari* is an obvious example, perhaps also such military words as *četa* (< *quinta, *centa = target) and *dūška* (< discus). The usually suggested Gothic intermediate step is not necessary.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The entry of the Slavs into Christendom*

conversion may only be expected to follow a favourable political and military situation when the barbarians realise that the adoption of the civilised way of life is the best way to hold on to and expand the advantages which they have already wrested from their opponents; and the regulator of civilised life, as of their own, is religion.

The earliest records of such Slav officers accepted into Byzantine military service come at the beginning of the second phase, which covers the second half of the sixth century. By then permanent settlements south of the Danube had been made and enough was known by the Slavs about the Empire to make the capture of a great port such as Thessaloniki (Saloniki) a definite, if as yet remote, aim. The historian Agathias records three undoubtedly Slav names of officers employed, presumably with their own contingents, on the Persian front: Vsegord, Svarun and Dobrojezda.⁵ This was in 555. It is evident that Dobrojezda's son, Leontios, was a Christian.⁶ They were Slavs from the north-west shores of the Black Sea, known to the Greeks as *Antai*.^a

Before the death of Justinian in 565 a new factor was added. The Avars, incited by the Byzantine government to attack the Slavs in the rear, established themselves in their turn in the former Hunnic lands. They were a Turkic people, more warlike than the Slavs.^b Their military might was based, as always among nomads, on cavalry and they succeeded in imposing their rule, at least transitorily, on many of the more peaceable Slavs. Under their leadership, and notably from the reign of Justin II (565–78) under their great military commander Bajan, the severity of the invasions increased. Sometimes the Slav penetrations were attempts to escape the clutches of the Avars, sometimes Slavs formed the mass of troops under Avar command. A large-scale invasion of Greece led by a Slav⁷ in 577/8 seems to have been of the former kind. The Byzantine provinces immediately south of the Danube must be assumed permanently lost by about this time, their sees abandoned and their population subject to the new pagan overlords. Justinian, who prided himself on his alliance with the Antes against other Slavs by adopting the by-name *Antikos*, did his best to protect Macedonia, the centre of Balkan communications, by strong new defences along the

^a To what extent the *Antai* (**Avrai*) or Antes were predominantly Slav or (more probably) mixed with other peoples such as Iranians cannot be entered into here. The name *Antai* is attested in Byzantine use from c. 550 to c. 630, after which it disappears, evidently with the loose federation which it denoted.

^b The Avars who settled in Europe probably had no right to that name. There may have been a Mongol element in their blood but their language was apparently Altaic. See pp. 18–20.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Slavs in the Byzantine Empire*

Danube, but in vain; he had to move the civil capital of Illyricum back from Sirmium in Pannonia to Saloniki. Sirmium was destroyed by the Avars in 582. It could be seen in retrospect that to allow the militaristic and less adaptable Avars to manipulate the Slavs, who were potentially sedentary settlers and valuable as such, was an irreparable mistake. Thereby the Slavs' adoption of Orthodox civilisation was certainly delayed.

The last two decades of the sixth century show a rapid decline in Byzantine resistance. On the one hand the barbarian pressure continued to increase, especially as the Avars were now always enemies. On the other, the Empire was increasingly endangered from the 580s by the recrudescence of Persian power. Constantinople's position at the hub of communications, equally accessible from all points of the compass, though an overwhelming economic advantage, was a recurrent military weakness. The heart of the Byzantine Empire—Asia Minor—had to be defended at all costs from eastern enemies. But equally the approaches to the capital and to Saloniki, the second city of the Empire, from the north and west had to be guarded. The Slavs owe their permanent lodgement in the Balkans at least partly to the fatal division of Byzantine power between two fronts. By the 580s they reached the point of being able to lay siege to the city of Saloniki, sometimes with Avar help. The most serious of many such attempts to take the city came in the early seventh century: a siege in 612 is recorded in an inscription in the church of St Demetrios, the patron saint of the city; and others followed in 614–16 and about 618. The *Miracles of St Demetrios* show that by this time the most favourably placed Slavs had already adopted much of the Byzantine art of war.⁸ Slavs are reported in the Peloponnese in the 580s. It is evident that by 600 all the country north of Saloniki was virtually lost to the Empire and that the penetration of peninsular Greece followed at once.

The third phase therefore runs from the beginning of the seventh century. The Emperor Maurice's last half-hearted attempt at maintaining the Danube as the frontier of the Empire was abandoned by his successor Phokas. Slav settlement reached its peak in the North Balkans.⁹ Heraklios had to abandon Greece in order to save Asia Minor from the Persians; the major part of his Balkan troops had been withdrawn in 602/3 and transferred to the Eastern Front. In 617 a combined Avar and Slav attack on the Imperial City was beaten off; in August 626 it was threatened by Persians from the one side and Slavs from the other.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The entry of the Slavs into Christendom*

Further Slav attempts to reduce Saloniki continued to be made till the end of the seventh century but in the main it was now a question of how much territory the Slavs could occupy permanently in face of only local and inferior Byzantine resistance. Peninsular Greece and the Peloponnese gradually filled up. The islands were not beyond Slav attention: a large expedition to Crete took place in 623. This implies considerable occupation of the Peloponnese already.

Justinian's proud new metropolitan see, Justiniana Prima, which he had erected at his alleged birthplace,^a can scarcely have continued to exist except in shreds and patches. To create it he had detached from the Vicariate of Saloniki all the lands to the north and west of the new town, from the Sirmium district of Pannonia to the South Dalmatian province of Prevalitana. It is thought that the towns of Justiniana Prima, Ulpiana (modern Lipljan) and Nissa (Niš) must have been abandoned by the end of Heraklios's reign.¹⁰ They fell to ruin since the Slavs were not yet interested in urban life. Like the Germanic peoples faced with Roman towns, they saw them as 'walled tombs'. Justiniana Prima is last mentioned in 602.

Once again the Byzantine Empire received an unexpected and dangerous blow. No sooner had Heraklios got the better of the Persians than the armies of Islam suddenly erupted out of the Arabian peninsula. The Persian Empire was rapidly overwhelmed. Syria was lost to the Byzantine Empire first (from 634); attacks on Asia Minor began in 647, on Cyprus in 649. By the 660s Constans II despaired even of defending the capital. But control of the sea just tipped the scales in Byzantine favour, as neither the Slavs nor the bedouin Arabs were maritime peoples, though the latter early appreciated the value of Syrian and Egyptian skill at sea. The first great Arab blockade of Constantinople took place in 674–8; the Slavs immediately made further ineffectual attacks on Saloniki. The last Arab attempt to win the Imperial City came in 717–18. From that date the Byzantine Empire regained confidence that it could hold its own against Islam and a certain stability in the East was slowly re-established.^b

Small wonder that little attention could be given to Greece in the

^a It is now identified with the ruins at Caričin Grad, some 6 km. from Lebane (S.W. of Leskovac in Serbian Macedonia).

^b So also in the West. After the Moslem conquest of the Iberian peninsula from 711, Charles Martel's victory over the Saracens in France in 732 marks the limit of their attempts at expansion into Western Europe. The Carolingians shortly afterwards went over to the counter-attack but the Byzantine Empire's offensive against Islam scarcely got under way before the second half of the tenth century.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Slavs in the Byzantine Empire*

seventh century. Byzantine historians provide little information on the extent and organisation of the new Slav areas of settlement, or *σκληβηρία*.¹¹ Throughout the seventh and eighth centuries effective Byzantine rule, secular and ecclesiastical, scarcely reached beyond the seaports to which the Greeks tenaciously clung, except in a limited part of Central Greece. Saloniki, Patras, Nauplia, Monemvasía, Corinth (with the great fortress of Acrocorinth) remained Greek; the interior was left to the barbarians. As farmers the Slavs wanted land but they were often prepared to use land which had been less attractive to the resident population—marsh and forest.^a The fact that the Byzantine writ hardly ran outside the maritime towns does not imply that the interior of Greece was emptied of Greeks. In the Peloponnese it is probable that the Greek peasant population still outnumbered the infiltrating Slavs at least till the middle of the eighth century. When the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenetos wrote, in the middle of the tenth century, that all Greece ‘became Slav and was lost to civilisation’, he was not thinking of proportions of blood.¹²

Here and there Byzantine institutions survived even in the interior of the Balkans. It is known for example that the garrison and population of Serdica (modern Sofia) held out for a long time in the middle of a Slav sea—possibly until its capture by the Bulgarians in 809—but the town gradually dwindled till it was no more than a village round the church of the Holy Wisdom; hence the modern name. Even such small Greek centres may have exerted an influence on the surrounding Slavs quite out of proportion to their size; but the silence of history does not allow us to follow the process.

The social organisation of the Slavs during the centuries of immigration appears to have been still largely tribal *sensu lato*. To them would still apply Prokopios’s term *δημοκρατία*, implying the communal responsibility vested in the tribal council or *veche*. But the sixth and seventh centuries must have given rise here and there to a more powerful military aristocracy. Fluctuating supra-tribal combinations came into temporary being when a capable war-leader could impose himself. Thus five tribes concerted in the siege of Saloniki in 614–16 under a common

^a Some of these bad lands must in fact have been created by the ravages of the Slavs themselves and their Avar partners. Pillage and enslavement on top of sheer destruction produced at least in parts of the Balkans those depopulated wastes such as are frequently bewailed in Western sources after the passage of various Germanic peoples, especially in the fifth century (*loca invia, solitudines*). The Vandals were among the worst devastators.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The entry of the Slavs into Christendom*

commander. But there is little sign that the process of settlement led to larger units stable enough to become a new stage in social development. The 'great family', no doubt similar to the institution preserved almost to our own times in the *zadruga* of Serbia and Montenegro, was the social unit. This system allowed the Slavs to intermingle with existing populations, taking advantage of less favourable parcels of land.¹³ Thus in contradistinction to many other areas colonised by Slavs, no strong political organisations arose in Greece such as could in due course become foci of resistance to hellenization.

The density of Slav settlements in Greece was also far from even; study of Slav place names suggests that the western parts both of peninsular Greece and of the Peloponnese received or retained a denser Slav population than the eastern. Over 500 Slav place names are still identifiable in the area Epirus–Acarnania–Aetolia, only some 300 in the larger area Thessaly–Attica. Similarly in the Peloponnese there are about three times as many Slav place names in the western as in the eastern half (Argolis, Laconia). As is to be expected, the absolute figure for Macedonia is very high indeed.¹⁴

Byzantine hold on Greece reached its lowest ebb about the year 700. The Empire became resigned to the disaster. Its own political instability and the armies and fleets of Islam were capable of destroying it; the Slavs did not seem such a formidable menace. They were on a par with the Goths and might in fact, if a little tamed, provide that extra military manpower as mercenaries which was so urgently needed. As with the Goths, their loyalty would no doubt be precarious, but it was better than nothing. The Byzantine government was thus now quite glad to accept Slav colonisation of certain areas where they might act as buffers against further barbarian incursions. Moreover it early practised deliberate transportation of Slavs to depopulated regions where they could be peacefully hellenized and drawn on for manpower—for instance the transfer of considerable numbers under their own chiefs to Bithynia in 658 and 688/9. Perhaps Constantinople had similar hopes of the Bulgars who were admitted into the Dobrudja in about 679 and soon dominated all the Slavs of that region.^a But in the event Bulgar rule over Slavs was to be a greater menace to the Byzantine Empire than that of the Avars.

Slav Greece may be said to cover the period 600–860.¹⁵ It is difficult to say what the Byzantine Empire considered its effective northern frontier to be in the seventh–eighth centuries. Macedonia was certainly

^a See p. 155.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Slavs in the Byzantine Empire*

lost. Kastoria (in present-day Greek Macedonia) apparently remained in Byzantine hands but probably little to the north of it. Thrace up to the Balkan range had to be held at all costs.

Full of Slavs though Greece might be Constantinople never considered it irretrievably lost. So gradual was the process of recovery that few events were recorded before the end of the eighth century. The creation of a *Theme* is the sign of the effective reimposition of Byzantine administration. The *Theme* of Thrace, on the doorstep of the City, was organised as early as the reign of Justinian II (658–95), soon after the settlement of the Bulgar horde, that of Macedonia (Western Thrace, centred on Adrianople) not till the end of the eighth century, following the successful pacificatory campaigns of Stavrakios (783) under Empress Irene.¹⁶ A *Theme* of Saloniki became practicable not later than 836.

The Slavs of northern Greece were, for strategic and economic reasons, of more immediate concern: any spread of Bulgarian power had to be countered. The campaign of 783 repeated the work of Constantine V in 758, who also resettled in Bithynia a large number of Slavs restive under Bulgarian aggression. The policy of protecting and encouraging the loyalty of the Slav peasantry can be observed also in some clauses of the *Farmers' Law* (Νόμος γεωργικός) which probably took form as early as the end of the seventh century.¹⁷ But peace was always precarious. The habit of raiding, two centuries old, was always liable to break out afresh: a typical case is noted in 768 when Constantine V had to ransom Christian prisoners taken by the Slavs on various North Aegean islands.¹⁸

Yet in an empire where hellenization counted far above racial origin an Imperial career was now open to any enterprising Slav. By the eighth century—and patently in the ninth—this process must have gone far. It is even asserted that the insignificant Iconoclast Patriarch Niketas (*fungebatur* 766–80) was a Slav, but the details of his career are unknown.^a Thomas, a Slav of Asia Minor, became a prominent officer under the Emperor Leo (813–20). He attempted to avenge the murder of his patron by the usurping Michael II by a general revolt in which he himself was acclaimed as rival emperor.¹⁹ He is said to have drawn support from the as yet relatively uncivilised Slavs of the Peloponnese. The seriousness of the revolt was indirectly responsible for the occupation of undefended Crete by the Moslems in 827.

^a It is quite plausible to accept a Slav derivation for the name of the prominent Byzantine family Rangavis (Ραγκαβῆς), which provided an emperor in Michael (*regnat* 811–13), though it is more probably Armenian.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10758-7 - The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs

A. P. Vlasto

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The entry of the Slavs into Christendom*

The Peloponnese was still largely outside Imperial control. In about 807 a dangerous Slav attack on the city of Patras was heavily defeated²⁰—particularly dangerous in that Saracen ships were prepared to combine with the Slav land army in this enterprise. The Byzantine authorities were very sensitive to the danger of such an alliance. The ‘battle of Patras’ was probably decisive in making the Peloponnese thenceforward accessible to rapid rehellenization; it was reorganised as a *Theme* not later than the reign of Michael I Rangavis.

By the middle of the ninth century further *Themes* of Strymon and Epirus had been set up, perhaps expansions or confluents of what had earlier been called ἀρχοντῖα,^a that is, a province predominantly inhabited by Slavs under special administration. The *Theme* of Strymon, centred on Serres, now linked those of Saloniki and Macedonia into a solid Byzantine reacquisition.²¹ The increase in tempo and urgency of Byzantine measures of rehellenization at this time was obviously motivated by the ever more formidable menace of the virtually Slav state of the Bulgars, whose ruler Krum had just defeated and slain the Christian Emperor himself (811).^b Slav tribes not under his direct rule were still liable to join his armies on campaign. The *Life of St Gregory the Decapolite*²², who died in Saloniki in 842, provides a few sidelights. We learn that in the early decades of the ninth century—that is, when SS Cyril and Methodios^c were born in Saloniki—the Slavs living on the lower reaches of the Strymon were very active as pirates and no doubt still pagan. But the tide was now about to turn. Only a small area of agricultural hinterland remained in control of the city and therefore particular attention was paid to those Slavs who were a danger to its communications and food supplies. By 879 the evangelisation of these Slavs was well in hand; for Paul, Bishop of the Strymonians, a tribe which stood across the Bulgarian trade-route, and Peter, Bishop of the Druguvitai who, with the Sagudatai, occupied part of the rich plains to the west of the city, were signatories to the acts of the Council of Constantinople in that year. The Ezerites and Serbs of Macedonia also had bishops by 879.²³

Evangelisation necessarily started from the coastal cities which the Greeks held. We must suppose that the main source of missionaries was

^a This is clearly what is meant by *knjaženije* in *VM* 2–3, which Methodios was sent to govern at an early age: see p. 33.

^b See p. 157.

^c Cyril and Methodios were the monastic names of Constantine and Michael (?): see pp. 32 and 56 below.