Introduction

THE LAND

OUR NARRATIVE CONCERNS primarily the history of the peoples of the Balkan peninsula, an area of land surrounded by the Black, Aegean, Ionian, and Adriatic seas. Although the line of the Danube, Sava, and Kupa rivers has often been given as designating the northern perimeter of the region, this account will also be concerned with the fate of lands across the Danube inhabited by Romanian, Croatian, Slovene, and Hungarian populations. From a geographic point of view, the outstanding feature of the area under study is its mountainous character; *Balkan* comes from the Turkish word for a chain of wooded mountains. The great ranges dividing the peninsula and the Carpathians to the north had the effect of separating the peoples from each other; there is no natural center for the region. In order to understand much of subsequent Balkan history the reader should first study Map 1, giving particular attention to both the mountains and the river systems.

To the north, in the territory of present-day Romania, the sweep of the Carpathian Mountains dominates the landscape. To the south, Bulgaria is divided by the Balkan Mountains and separated from Greece by the Rhodope chain. Turning to the northwest, a Slovenian and Croatian population is found in the Karawanken and Julian Alps. Continuing southward, the Dinaric Alps form a formidable barrier between the Adriatic coast and the hinterland of Bosnia and Hercegovina. Further south, the Pindus Mountains run the length of Greece.

The major river system of the region is formed by the Danube and its tributaries: the Drava, the Tisza (Theiss), the Sava, the Morava, the Isker, the Sereth, and the Pruth. Throughout history the Danube has been the principal route in this area for military invasion, trade, and travel. This great river highway provided obstacles to communication only at the Iron Gates, a narrow section with rocks and swift currents. The other important rivers – the Vardar, the Struma, and the Maritsa – flow into the Aegean Sea. Because of the mountainous nature of the Adriatic coastline, the rivers emptying into that sea are not of a character to foster waterborne trade or travel. The Ne-

Map 1. Relief map of the Balkans

retva, the Drin, and the Shkumbî, nevertheless, played an important part in the development of the adjacent lands.

Dominated by mountains and hills, the region has relatively few areas of rich agricultural land. The exceptions are the Danube River valley, including sections of present-day Romania and two areas of Yugoslavia – Slavonia and the Vojvodina. The Maritsa and Shkumbî river valleys are also valuable agricultural areas. The mountains, with their extensive forests and pastures, of course also provide support for the population. The mineral wealth was exploited in Roman times, but not as much as at the present time.

Situated strategically at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, the Balkan peninsula has proved both a tempting object of conquest and a passageway to other regions. Although the mountains contributed to particularism and isolation among the Balkan people, they did not provide a shield against outside invasion. The entire peninsula is cut through by major corridors, which run chiefly through the great river valleys and the mountain passes. Along these relatively few great routes, invading forces could easily enter, whether they were nomadic tribes with their ponies and herds or modern great powers with railroads, cars, trucks, and tanks.

Two principal doorways opened the peninsula to outside penetration. The Danube River valley was historically the major route by which people from the Asian steppelands entered not only the Balkans, but also Central Europe. No natural barriers hindered passage from the lands north of the Black Sea, along the Danube valley, into the Pannonian Plain. Invading tribes could also proceed southward and either cross the Balkan Mountains at one of the convenient passes or follow the coastline. The second roadway commenced at Belgrade at the confluence of the Danube and the Sava and proceded down the Morava valley. At Niš two branches formed, one leading through the Vardar valley to Thessaloniki (Salonika), the great Aegean port, and the other crossing over the Dragoman Pass to Sofia, Plovdiv (Philippopolis), Adrianople (Edirne), and finally Constantinople (Istanbul), the most important city of the Balkans. In Roman times another road, the Via Egnatia, was of principal significance. This major line of communication ran from Durrës (Durazzo) on the Adriatic coast through the Shkumbî valley, by Lake Ohrid, to Thessaloniki, and from there either by sea or through Thrace to Constantinople. Other river valleys were also of significance. The Bulgarian region near the present capital of Sofia is linked with the Danube through the Isker River valley and with the Aegean by the Struma valley. The Neretva River connects the Adriatic seacoast with the Bosnian interior.

The long coastline to the east and south, with its convenient harbors and river outlets, was also conducive to the establishment of influence and control by outside powers; the islands of the Aegean, Ionian, and Adriatic seas were similarly open to attack by sea. Venice, for example, was able to build up an impressive imperial presence in the area because of its commercial and naval supremacy. In more recent times, Britain's naval power enabled that state to

exert great influence in the area, in particular in Greece and the entire eastern Mediterranean.

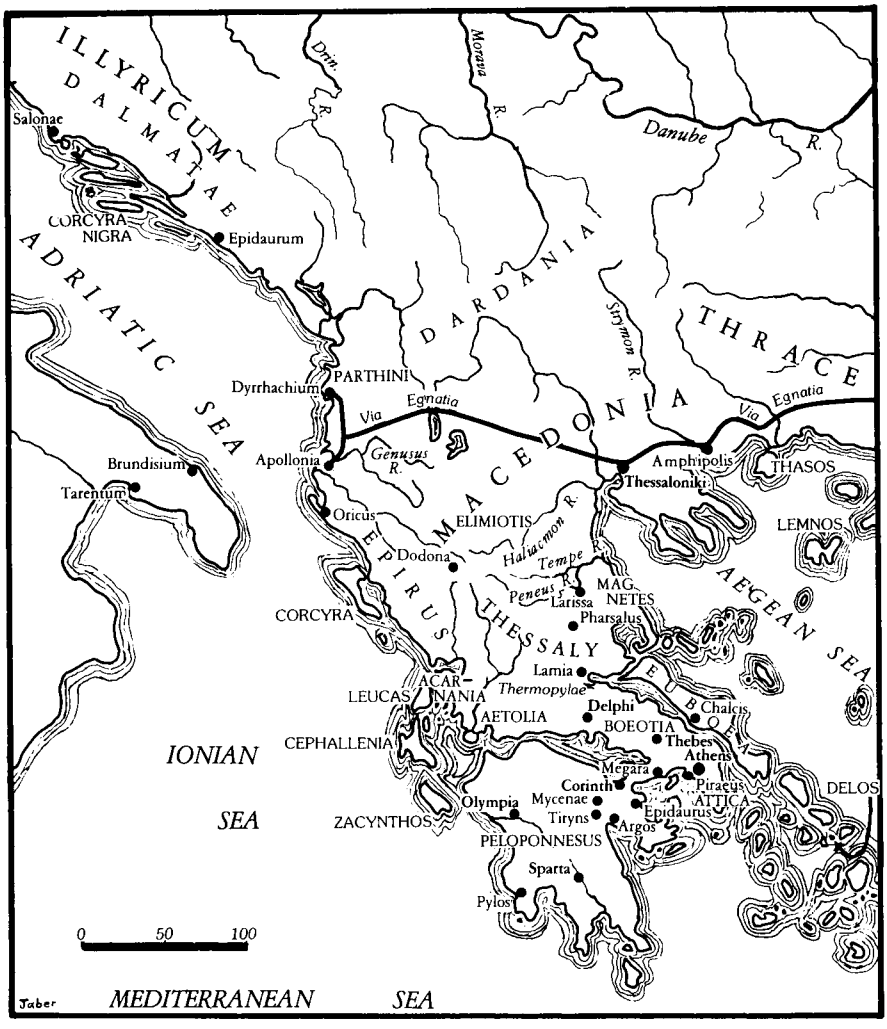
THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Ancient civilizations: Greece and Rome

Although this account commences formally with the last decade of the seventeenth century, a brief survey of the previous period is necessary because of the important role of history in the development of the Balkan national states, the main theme of this book. As will be demonstrated later, at each stage of the formation of the modern governments the leaders repeatedly recalled the past to explain or justify their policies. No attempt will be made here to present a detailed account of Balkan history since the Iron Age; the intention is only to discuss briefly those events and individuals that exerted a direct influence on the later period.

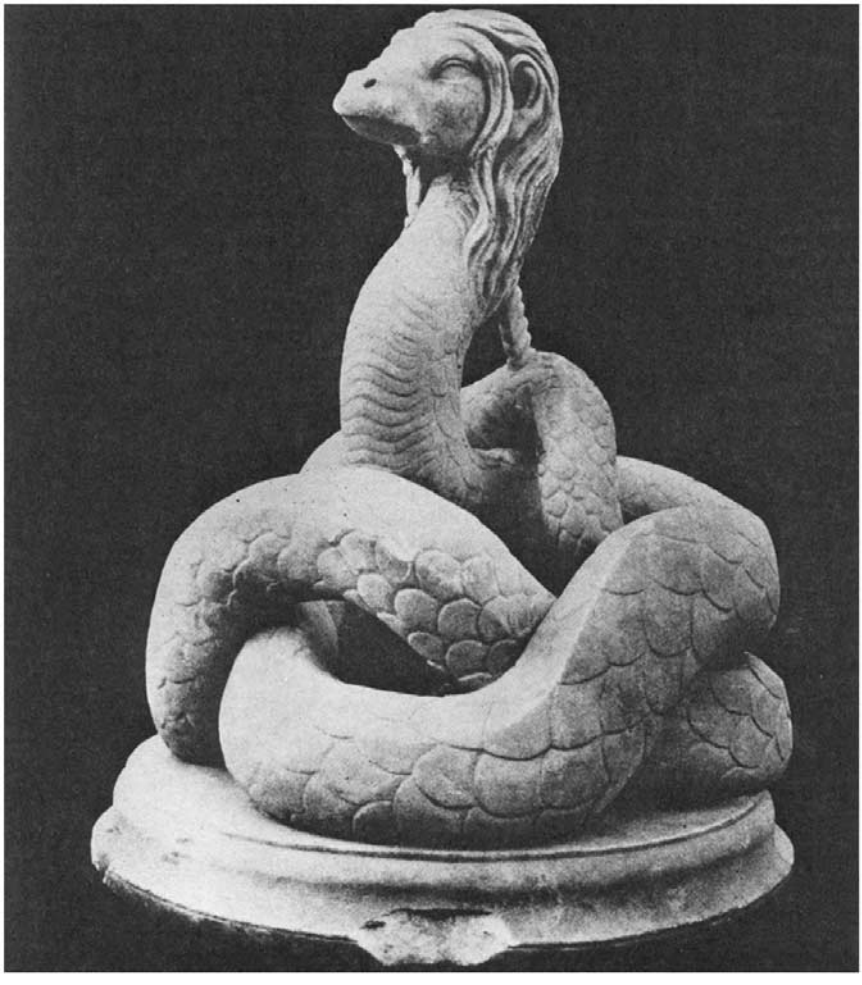
The first inhabitants of the peninsula about whom a body of information is available are the Illyrians, who lived in the region generally west of the Morava valley to the Adriatic, and the Thracians, who settled east of the river in lands stretching from the Aegean to north of the Danube. Both of these peoples, with Iron Age civilizations, had tribal organizations. The Thracians established an organized state in the fifth century B.C. The Dacians, a branch of the Thracians, were to become a basic element in the formation of the Romanian nationality. The Illyrians were the ancestors of the modern Albanians.

The major political and cultural achievements of the ancient period did not, however, take place in the central Balkan region, but to the south in the Greek lands (see Map 2). The shores and islands of the Aegean Sea were to be the site of the first great European civilization, that of the Greeks, who at this time called themselves Hellenes and their land Hellas. An advanced Bronze Age civilization developed in Greece in the period 1600–1200 B.C. Such sites as Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos, Athens, and Thebes were centers of a palace-based society marked by a relatively complex economic and social organization, literacy, and a refined art and architecture heavily influenced by the non-Hellenic civilization of Minoan Crete. By 1450 B.C. Greeks from the mainland had occupied Crete and Rhodes, and extensive commercial relations existed with the lands of the Near East and Egypt. Records of the Hittite kingdom have been interpreted to indicate the political presence of Greeks on the mainland of Asia Minor. For reasons that are not fully understood, the sophisticated civilization of Bronze Age Greece collapsed in the period after 1200 B.C. The invasion of new groups of Hellenes, speaking the Doric dialect of the Greek language, was accompanied by a marked decline in material civilization on the Greek mainland and by the migration of large numbers of Greeks to the shores of Asia Minor.



Map 2. Ancient Greece and the Balkans

Greek civilization subsequently developed around the city-states of the mainland, particularly in Attica, the Peloponnesus, and Ionia in western Anatolia. Each was composed of the city with its surrounding territory, the most important being Athens, Sparta, Thebes, Argos, and Corinth. Some, in particular Athens, developed extensive maritime empires. Each had the attributes of a sovereign state; they conducted foreign relations and waged war independently. They were able to cooperate when threatened by the Persian attacks in the fifth century B.C., but they engaged in the suicidal Peloponnesian Wars, which were waged between Athens and Sparta, each supported by its allies. Despite their political divisions and their willingness to war with



Serpent from Tomis (Constanţa), second or third century A.D. (From V. Canarache, A. Aricescu, V. Barbu, and A. Rădulescu, *Tezaurul de Sculpturi de la Tomis*. Bucharest: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1963.)

each other, the Greeks were conscious of their cultural unity and shared a strong feeling of superiority to the "barbarian" outside world.

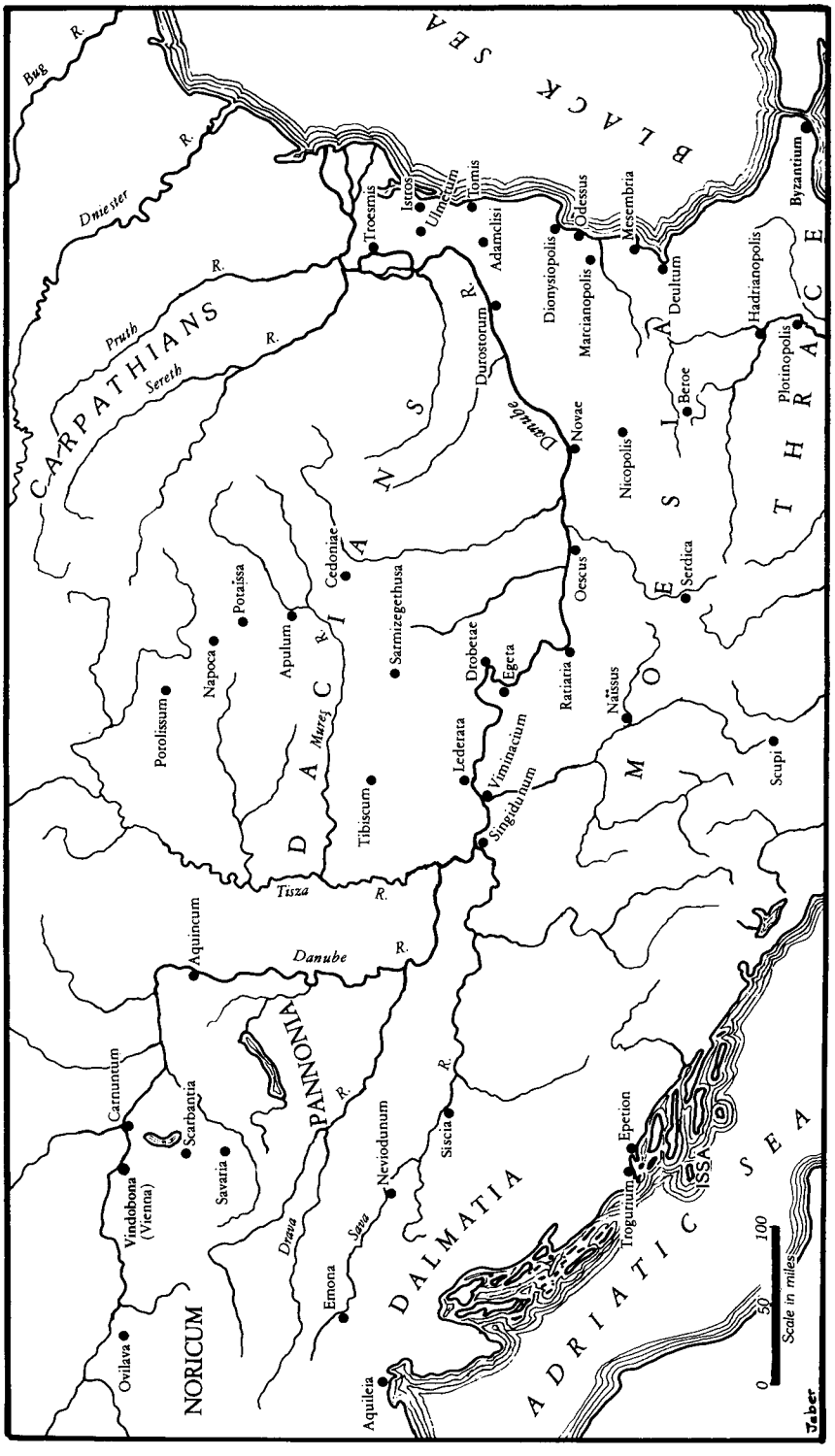
The great cultural heritage of classical Greece, which so deeply affected later Western European patterns of thought, is based chiefly on the civilization of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. in Athens. The architecture of fifth-century Athens has deeply influenced styles of building, especially of public offices, to the present. Greek literature – for instance, the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes; the histories of Herodotus and

Thucydides; and the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle – was to become an integral part of the education of the leaders of modern Europe. Moreover, although Greek society was based on slavery, most states developed representative institutions involving the direct participation of free male citizens in the political guidance of the state. The achievements of this age were to remain a unique and brilliant memory for the Greek people and to play a major role in their later national revival.

For Balkan history in general, Greek colonization was most important. The Ionian Greeks of Asia Minor, in particular, were extremely active in founding cities along the seacoasts of the peninsula. Examples of Greek settlement are Istros (Histria), Tomis (Constanţa), Callatis, Odessos (Varna), and Mesembria (Nesebŭr) along the Black Sea coast and Trogurium (Trogir), Epetion (near Split), and Issa (on the island of Vis) on the Adriatic. These cities, primarily commercial centers, reproduced the architecture and modes of life and thought of the Greek parent, and accordingly they had considerable influence on the people living near them. The Greek settlers themselves, however, were content to remain on the periphery of the peninsula. They did not attempt to penetrate into the interior or to make wide territorial conquests.

Although united in language, religion, and culture, the city-states dispersed much of their strength in constant internal quarreling and warfare. They were thus not prepared to meet the challenge of the strong military power that arose in Macedonia beginning with the reign of Philip of Macedon (359–336 B.C.). The Macedonians were probably Illyrian in ethnic background, although by this time the upper class was under the strong cultural influence of Greece. Philip's son, Alexander the Great (336–323 B.C.), perhaps the most famous conqueror of the ancient world, extended his domains as far as India. When he died at a young age, his vast empire fell apart. Macedonia remained an important state, but it could not dominate even the peninsula.

Meanwhile, another imperial power was rising in Italy. Roman forces first moved across the Adriatic in the third century B.C. Their aim was to suppress the pirates who were operating from the eastern coast of the Adriatic, which was subsequently to become the Roman province of Dalmatia. Having defeated Carthage and having become master of the western Mediterranean (201 B.C.), Rome embarked upon a generation of warfare and political activity in the eastern Mediterranean. By 167 B.C., Roman hegemony over the eastern Mediterranean area was an accomplished fact. In the year 148 B.C., after four victorious wars (215–205, 200–197, 171–167, 149–148 B.C.), the Romans acquired the territory of Macedonia and declared it a Roman province. Two years later Roman armies defeated the forces of the Achaean League of Greek cities, destroyed the city of Corinth, and annexed Greece. By the end of the reign of Augustus (27 B.C.–A.D. 14), most of the peninsula south of the Danube had been secured (see Map 3). Unlike the Greek colonists, the



Map 3. The Danube lands under Roman rule

Introduction

Roman rulers were not content with scattered settlements. They occupied the entire region, and they governed it directly. Intensely concerned with problems of administration and defense, they established a network of military camps and roads. Roman settlements came into being along the great natural highways. Modern Belgrade (Singidunum), Edirne (Hadrianopolis, Adrianople), Niš (Naissus), and Sofia (Serdica), among other cities, were important centers in this period. The Roman cities, like the Greek, resembled their counterparts in the homeland, with temples, forums, baths, and advanced water and sewage systems.

Roman influence was to be profound. Participation in the economic life of a vast empire brought obvious advantages. Agricultural production rose; the gold, silver, iron, and lead mines were exploited. Illyrium, the western section, in particular, enjoyed a period of real prosperity. During the centuries of Roman rule the population became largely Romanized. Some joined the army and the administration; Roman patterns of life, including the language, were accepted. Men born in the Balkans, for instance, the emperors Claudius, Aurelian, Probus, Diocletian, and Maximian, rose to high posts in the state. The entire region also enjoyed the advantages of the Pax Romana; for a long period the population was spared from major outside invasions or disastrous wars.

Defense, nevertheless, was a constant imperial problem. In general, Rome attempted to hold the line of the Danube, but there were some exceptions. Among the barbarian tribes threatening the Roman outposts, a particular danger came from the Dacians. Their king, Burebista (ca. 70–44 B.C.), succeeded in uniting a number of tribes, and he erected a stronghold at Sarmizegetusa in the Carpathian Mountains. Successful expeditions had been sent previously against the Dacians, but in A.D. 101 Trajan (98–117) determined to crush the independent kingdom. In A.D. 106 the Dacians, under their king Decebalus (87–106), were defeated, and their lands were brought directly under imperial rule. For the next 165 years the region was administered by Rome. Soldiers, administrators, and colonists were brought from all over the empire, many of them from other Balkan regions. The native Dacians were also Romanized. This outpost of empire, however, was difficult to defend. In order to shorten the lines of the Roman frontier, Emperor Aurelian (270–275) in 270 ordered the evacuation of the province. The Roman soldiers and administrators, together with part of the population, were then moved across the Danube. What happened to the rest of the inhabitants during the subsequent turbulent centuries was to become a matter of controversy.

From this time the Roman Empire faced increasing difficulties in holding its frontiers and preventing the massive incursion of outside tribes. For the Italian peninsula the chief danger came from the Germanic invaders, particularly the Goths. The Balkan lands suffered a millennium of devastation at the hands of succeeding waves of invading tribes. The Goths of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries and the Huns, also of the fourth and fifth centu-

ries, were followed by the Avars, Slavs, and Bulgars in the sixth and seventh centuries, the Magyars, or Hungarians, in the ninth and tenth, the Pechenegs in the tenth and eleventh, the Cumans in the twelfth and thirteenth, and the Mongols in the thirteenth.

Most of these people had been displaced from their original homelands by stronger tribes; others were attracted by the relative wealth of the Roman lands. In general, they moved with their flocks and families, following the grasslands that were necessary for the subsistence of their horses and livestock. They thus kept to the great highways that have already been described. Movement was necessarily slow; invasion and occupation could last decades. Some of the tribes, such as the Huns and Mongols, came as raiders; they conquered and looted large areas and then passed on. In contrast, the Slavs, Magyars, and Bulgars remained to settle the land. They either conquered and absorbed the resident population or lost their individual identities and amalgamated with the local society. These invasions naturally caused a basic alteration in the ethnic composition of the Balkan people.

Meanwhile, enormous changes had taken place in the organization and the influence of the Roman Empire.

Byzantium

Under increasing pressure from the outside, and facing complex internal problems, the Roman government had to meet the issue of how best to administer its wide domains in a time of adversity. Although maintaining the theory of a united empire, Diocletian (284–305) was forced to create four administrative units. Under Constantine (306–337), a single emperor ruled directly over the entire domain, but the administrative separation was restored after his death. In 395 a final division was made. The line, which was to be of enormous historical significance, ran from the Adriatic coast, along the Drina River, and then to the Sava and the Danube. In the future the boundary between the Catholic and Orthodox churches and the western and eastern cultural zones was to be approximately this frontier.

A language line was in existence, too. Despite the fact that they were the conquering power, the Romans had a deep respect for Greek civilization; they cultivated and preserved Greek art and learning. The Roman Empire was officially bilingual, and Greek as well as Latin was a language of imperial administration and the law courts. Greek was also the chief spoken language in the lands approximately south of Niš in the peninsula and, of course, in all of the areas of Greek settlement in the islands and Asia Minor. The use of Greek as the language of the New Testament is an indication of its importance as a major lingua franca throughout the vast extent of the Roman Empire.

For Balkan history the development of the Eastern Roman Empire was