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The lands of the South Slavs

The lands which the South Slav tribes first entered, in the middle of the first millennium AD, were geographically very different from their earlier homelands north of the Carpathians, in the Vistula basin and the Ukraine.

South-east Europe is a region of great geographical diversity, in which several major physiographic and climatic zones converge. The topography and drainage patterns suggest certain routes by which invaders have penetrated from all directions into the Balkan heartland. In the north, the Pannonian lowlands, drained by the Danube and its tributaries, the Drava and the Tisa, extend across the great Hungarian Alföld to the foothills of the Carpathians and to the southern entrance of the Moravian gate near Bratislava on the Danube. It is well established that the prehistoric amber trade, from Samland on the Baltic coast, used this route, and it was probably also used by German pastoralists and barbarian invaders.

The Danube itself provides an opening into Wallachia, via the Iron Gate at the south-eastern corner of the Pannonian plain. Trajan's arch at the entrance to the Gate commemorates the Roman conquest of Dacia in AD 102. The same passage, despite the narrow constriction of the valley at Djerdap, as the Danube forces its way between the Transylvanian Alps to the north and the Stara Planina to the south, may also have been a route for invaders into the Roman province of Pannonia, although the Iron Gate Pass, some 130 km (80 miles) further north, afforded a better route for the Goths who descended on Pannonia from Transylvania in the middle of the fourth century AD.

Belgrade stands at the meeting place of these Danubian routes and of two other historic highways. Southward the Morava–Vardar corridor leads to the Aegean at Salonika (Thessaloniki). This, too, was an element in the amber route. Archaeologists have been able to follow this trade route across Europe from the Baltic to the Mediterranean by analysing pieces of amber with unique chemical properties which identify the source area in Samland. As in some majestic paperchase, they have traced the amber carriers back from the Greek islands to the pine forests and sandy heaths of

the Baltic littoral. The Vardar–Morava corridor not only carried traders, it carried cultural influences from the Byzantine Greek world into the Danube basin, most notably the Christian faith as practised by the apostles of the Slavs, Kiril and Metodije. It was also used by the armies of the eastern emperor, Theodosius, when he marched through the Balkans in AD 394 to overthrow Eugenius and make himself master of both eastern and western empires. The army of Theodosius followed the Sava valley from Pannonia to confront the Romans in the Vipava valley (then known as the Frigidus), which is on the line of another historic routeway. This leads from the neighbourhood of modern Ljubljana (Roman Emona) by way of the Pear Tree Pass (Hrušica) to the Vipava and thence to the head of the Adriatic at Aquileia near present-day Trieste. Gibbon records that on the day of the decisive battle a ‘violent tempest’ blowing in the faces of the defending Romans ‘disordered their ranks, wrested their weapons from their hands, and diverted or repelled their ineffectual javelins’. This was a *bura* (Italian *bora*), the wind which originates when an area of low pressure over the Adriatic attracts cold air from the continental interior. The funnelling effect of such gaps in the mountains as the Pear Tree Pass or the adjacent Gate of Postojna increases the ferocity of the wind, which in local gusts can reach velocities of over 160 km per hour (100 mph) and cause falls in temperature of 22 °C (40 °F) within a few hours.

A major route between the eastern and western empires, the Via Egnatia, involved a ferry crossing of the Adriatic from Brindisi to Durazzo. From Durazzo the way ran across Albania to Ohrid and Bitola (Heraclea Lincestis) in Macedonia, and then via Salonika to Byzantium (Constantinople). Further north, another route later used by Ragusan merchants followed the Neretva valley, across the Ivan Pass, to Sarajevo.

The historic importance of these routeways owes much to the fact that they connect the contrasting environments of Alpine, Mediterranean and continental Europe. The movement of goods, the interaction of cultures and the clash of empires have, by the accident of geography, been channelled through a relatively small area of south-eastern Europe, imposing an indelible imprint on its peoples.

The range of natural environments contained within Yugoslavia itself is far greater than one might expect in an area only 5 per cent larger than the United Kingdom.

Alpine Yugoslavia

Alpine fold mountains make its northern and western land frontiers. Near the meeting place of the Austrian, Italian and Yugoslav borders in north-

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east Slovenia the Carnic, the Karawanken and the Julian Alps come together. Triglav, 2,864 m (9,400 ft) in the Julian Alps, the highest point in Yugoslavia, no longer, as in pre-war days, marks the frontier with Italy. The post-war frontier changes have brought the Alpine valley of the Isonzo (Soča) within the confines of Yugoslavia, and the present frontier follows the ridges to the west of the Soča to the point where the river enters Italy at Gorizia (Gorica) and flows across the Friulian plain to enter the Adriatic near Monfalcone (Tržič). Another Alpine valley, that of the Sava Dolinka, occupies a deep trench between the Karawanken ranges which separate Slovenia from Austrian Carinthia and the majestic limestone peaks of the Julian Alps to the south. Another branch of the Sava, the Sava Bohinjka, rises on the southern flanks of Triglav, flowing through subterranean passages under the valley of the Seven Lakes to emerge from a cave halfway up the sheer wall of Komarča as the waterfall of Slap Savica. After passing through the 45-metre-deep (150 ft) glacial basin of Lake Bohinj, it flows northward to join its sister stream near Lake Bled, and then through Slovenia and Croatia to join the Danube 940 km (587 miles) away at Belgrade.

Other Alpine ranges, following the east–west trend line of the main European Alpine complex, occupy the area between the Sava valley and the Austrian frontier. These include the Savinjski and Kamniški Alps, which attain heights of over 2,000 m (6,560 ft), and the high plateau of Pohorje, near Maribor, which rises to over 1,300 m (4,260 ft).

Notrajsko

South of the Julian Alps lies an area of limestone plateaus which extend southward towards Trieste and the Istrian peninsula and eastward towards the Kupa river. The Slovene name for this area is Notrajsko (Interior). The area behind Trieste carries the Slovene name Kras. This is more widely known to geomorphologists by its Germanic corruption, *Karst*. It displays the classic erosional features of limestone areas, and because of the pioneer work of the Serbian geographer Jovan Cvijić (1865–1927), the Slavonic terminology which he devised is still used by geomorphologists throughout the world to describe limestone scenery. *Polje*, the Serbo-Croat word used for a field, bears the special connotation of a large, flat-floored depression. *Dolina* (literally a valley) is a shallow, saucer-shaped depression, often leading to a sink-hole or *ponor*. Many of the larger depressions are filled with the characteristic Mediterranean soil, *terra rossa*, and are cultivated, mainly for fodder crops and vegetables. Others are subject to flooding when underground streams, swollen by

winter rains and melt waters, emerge from *sources vaclusiennes* (Slovene *vrelo*). The celebrated intermittent lake of Cerknica covers an area of 28.4 sq km (11 sq miles) and persists for several months. On the open surface of the plateau, soils are thin and in many areas almost devoid of cover, the bare rock surfaces displaying the appearance of a limestone pavement, dissected by a rectangular grid of fissures.

Intermittent drainage, underground watercourses and vast cave systems are features of the karst. The caves of Postojna and Škocjan are notable tourist attractions, and there is even a castle, Predjamski Grad, built into the mouth of a cave halfway up a sheer limestone cliff, to which access can be gained by way of a labyrinth of underground passages.

The nature of the underground drainage can give rise to international problems when streams cross under frontiers. This is the case with the Reka (Timavo) river, which disappears underground at Škocjan and emerges to enter the Gulf of Trieste, near Monfalcone, 40 km (25 miles) away.

Before the invention of refrigeration, peasants on the Slovene Karst stored blocks of ice in the depths of the caves, whence they could be transported in spring and summer to the fish market of Trieste, to be exchanged for the copper sulphate needed to treat the vines in order to control the ravages of the deadly aphid *Phylloxera*.

Although parts of the karst are barren and treeless, there are other areas where a covering of marls and sandstones known as *flysch*, derived from the deposits of the bed of an Eocene sea, provides the basis for surface drainage and soils. Tree growth is possible and, until the depredations of humans and goats destroyed much of the forest cover, timber cutting provided a much-needed additional source of income to supplement the meagre subsistence of the peasants. The forests of the Trnovski Gozd, above the Vipava valley, supplied timber to the shipyards of Trieste during the nineteenth century.

The Dinaric region

In the plateau lands of Notranjsko the north-west to south-east trend line of the Dinaric system may be discerned, in contrast to the east-west line of the main Alpine system. The western Dinaric system consists of a series of parallel limestone ranges which run behind the Adriatic coast for 720 km (450 miles) from Slovenia to the Albanian border and continue through Albania to the Pindos mountains of Greece. The predominant rocks are Cretaceous limestones, although in the Velebit mountains of northern

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Dalmatia the rocks are of Jurassic age. The narrow coastal plain between the mountain rampart and the sea is covered by Eocene *flysch*, and in the largest area of flat land in Dalmatia, the plain between Zadar and Šibenik, the underlying limestone is almost entirely masked by *flysch*. This is of great importance in providing a basis for the cultivation of cereals and the grazing of animals in an area where opportunities for agriculture are severely restricted.

The scores of islands which lie off the Adriatic coast are the crests of mountain ranges which foundered during periods of tectonic disturbances. Their alignment follows the same direction as the adjacent mainland ranges, to which they are structurally related. The same process of foundering has created along the shore a number of deep-water natural harbours by the inundation of the lower courses of streams. Where a breach has been made in the outer coastal ranges, the sea has penetrated into the depressions which run behind them parallel to the main Dinaric trend. Such features are found at Bakar, Šibenik, Split and Kotor.

Unfortunately the commercial value of these natural harbours is somewhat vitiated by the difficulty of communication inland across the Dinaric ranges to the centres of population in the interior of Yugoslavia. There are few rivers which are able to maintain a course across the grain of the land to penetrate from the interior to the sea. The most important are the Cetina, which enters the sea at Omiš; and the Neretva, between Dubrovnik and Split. The lower Cetina flows in a narrow, steep-sided gorge between bare mountains rising to heights of over 1,000 m (3,280 ft) which render it useless as a line of communication into the interior. The best access from this area of central Dalmatia to the upper course of the Cetina in Sinjsko Polje is from the coast at Split via Solin (Salona) and the steep defile at Klis.

The Neretva offers a better line of communication from its delta on the shores of the Neretvanski Kanal, a sheltered stretch of water lying between the coast and the Pelješac peninsula. The route inland, now followed by a railway and a modern road, leads to Mostar and then over the Ivan Pass to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia.

∧ All the features of karstic topography found in Slovenia are displayed on a grand scale in the Dinaric system. Between the parallel ranges lie a series of *polja* extending for over 640 km (400 miles) and reaching inland in a belt 100 km (64 miles) wide. The individual *polja* can be over 65 km (40 miles) long, but are seldom more than a few kilometres across, their long axes conforming to the north-west to south-east direction of the Dinaric trend lines.

Life in these karstic *polja* is an unremitting struggle against a cruel

environment. In pre-war times the Croatian economist Rudolf Bićanić undertook a survey of life on the Dinaric karst for the Croat Peasant Party, which he published under the title *Kako živi narod* (How the People Live). It describes the life of peasants in some of the poorest *polja* – Livno, Lika, Imotski and Sinjsko. To the natural hazards of intermittent drainage, alternate floods and droughts, and infertile, stony soil were added the human obstacles of antiquated systems of land tenure, primitive methods of farming, neglect of welfare services, poor communication and exploitation by moneylenders and merchants. The situation has improved in many ways, but it is not easy to overcome the problems created by natural obstacles and compounded by the legacy of centuries of neglect. These regions are still amongst the poorest and least developed in Yugoslavia. Visitors to the resorts on the Dalmatian coast do not always realise the poverty and backwardness which lie over the mountains only a few kilometres away from the bright lights of Split, Zadar and Šibenik.

The Adriatic coastlands

Relatively isolated from the interior of Yugoslavia by the mountain barrier which rises above them, the Adriatic coastlands and islands belong geographically to the Mediterranean world. The way of life of the Dalmatian peasants and fisherfolk, and of the citizens of the former Venetian colonies of Split, Šibenik and Zadar has for centuries resembled that of the Italians on the western shore of the Adriatic rather than that of their Slav cousins who inhabit the Balkan interior. The sea was a link not only with Italy but also with a wider world beyond the Mediterranean. Merchants from Ragusa (Dubrovnik) traded with the Levant and with northern Europe. Dalmatian sailors served in many fleets – with the Spanish Armada, with the Dutch, the English and the French during the period of their colonial rivalries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the Venetians during the heyday of the maritime republic, and even with the Americans during the War of Independence. When Trieste became the major outlet for the trade of central Europe, Dalmatians were found in ships of the Lloyd Triestino line.

E. A. Freeman's description of Dalmatia as 'a Slavonic land with an Italian fringe' refers to the cultural geography of the Adriatic coastlands, but it might also be applied to the physical geography (as 'a Dinaric land with a Mediterranean fringe'). The regime of the vine and olive is restricted to a zone varying in width from a few hundred metres under Velebit to 30 km (18 miles) near Zadar. Just as the coastal cities were subjected

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throughout the centuries to incursions from the interior by the forces of whichever power held sway beyond the mountains – Byzantines, Hungarians, Serbs and Turks – so the tranquillity of the Mediterranean climate is brutally violated from time to time by the icy blasts of the *bura*. The islands present a bare and inhospitable face to the mainland, as their landward slopes receive the full force of the wind. The sheltered, seaward-facing slopes support a typically Mediterranean vegetation, composed of aromatic shrubs (the maquis) and evergreen woods of Aleppo pine. The cultivated plants include figs, olives and vines. This vegetation pattern is also found on the sheltered lowland strips which lie in the shadow of the coastal mountain ranges.

The Dinaric ranges

There is an abrupt change in climate and vegetation once the coastal ranges are crossed. The height of the *polja* floors varies between 1,000 m (3,280 ft) in Glamočko Polje in the north and 400 m (1,300 ft) in Sinjsko Polje in central Dalmatia, descending to under 50 m (165 ft) at Titograd. In a few places, as in the lower Neretva valley, a breach in the mountain wall permits a gulf of Mediterranean air to penetrate inland, but more commonly the unbroken barrier shuts out the ameliorating influences from the sea. The contrast between the conditions on the coast and in the interior is illustrated by the climatic statistics for two stations less than 30 km (18.5 miles) apart. Ostra Point (Rt. Ostra) at the mouth of the Bay of Kotor enjoys a hot, dry summer, with average July temperatures of 25 °C (77 °F), and has warm, moist winters, with average January temperatures of 9 °C (48 °F). Of the annual rainfall of 975 mm (38.4 in), more than two-thirds occurs between October and March. In July and August the average number of rain days is only four per month. Cetinje, 720 m (2,205 ft) above sea level, the old capital of the kingdom of Montenegro, lies only 30 km away, on the landward side of the Lovćen range. Here January temperatures are below freezing point (−0.5 °C, 31 °F) and only in the three summer months does the average temperature rise above 15.5 °C (60 °F), July attaining 21 °C (70 °F). Total rainfall is 3,550 mm (139.7 in), over three times the amount received at Ostra.

Further inland, from the Dalmatian hinterland, in Bosnia and the Sandžak, strong continental influences are apparent, with a marked rainfall maximum in early summer – Sarajevo's wettest month is June – and much colder winters.

The Pannonian region

The full rigours of the continental climate are experienced in the Sava–Danube lowlands. Winters are cold, with biting winds sweeping in from the Hungarian plain. Summers are hot, with monthly averages of over 22 °C (70 °F). Total rainfall is low – Belgrade has only 609 mm (24 in) – and the wettest period is March–June. Summer thunderstorms are common, but the torrential downpours which they often bring are soon evaporated in the hot sun and are of limited value to agriculture. Irrigation is necessary to sustain the crops which grow on the fertile, loess-covered lowlands of one of Europe's richest grain-growing regions. Paradoxically, large-scale drainage and flood-control measures are also needed at other times of the year. The Danube and its principal tributaries, the Sava, Drava and Tisa, rise in areas where heavy rainfall is supplemented by melt water from Alpine glaciers, causing frequent inundation on the low-lying ground further downstream.

The Vardar region

The Vardar river, which flows through the centre of the Macedonian republic, reaches the Aegean Sea near Salonika. It provides the corridor through which the cold *Vardarac* wind – a cousin of the Dalmatian *bura* – brings continental influences from the Danubian lowlands in winter. Average January temperatures are below freezing point, even as far south as Bitola, which lies in the same latitude as Naples. By contrast, summers are very hot, with monthly averages above 22 °C (70 °F). Mediterranean influences penetrate northwards into the Vardar valley and the lowlands of Pelagonija. In these inland basins, separated from each other by rugged mountain ranges of crystalline rocks, sub-tropical crops such as rice, tobacco, cotton and opium poppies are grown. Total rainfall is low, with many places receiving under 500 mm (20 in) a year, but irrigation is possible, the water being provided by the Vardar and its tributary the Crna Reka, which rises in areas of higher rainfall. The Vardar region contains some of Yugoslavia's largest natural lakes – Ohrid, Prespa and Dojran, which occupy tectonic basins. Ohrid, the deepest lake in Yugoslavia (286 m (935 ft) at its greatest depth) is of great scientific interest, as it contains a species of trout which, like the omul in Lake Baikal, has survived from before the last Ice Age, the lake having been formed during the Tertiary period.

The rich variety of geographical environments provides a background to

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the diversity of ways of life and traditions of the Yugoslav peoples. Each region offers different opportunities and imposes different kinds of restriction on its inhabitants. Although certain routeways of international importance cross through their territory, many Yugoslav communities have lived in isolation from each other, developing unique cultural characteristics. The problem which faced the rulers of royal Yugoslavia and now faces the present communist-led society, is to create a sense of common loyalty amongst peoples whose geographical circumstances and historical experiences have tended towards diversity.

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The early Slav settlers

The Roman occupation

When the Romans first began to expand into the Balkans in the third century BC, the area was inhabited by Thracian, Illyrian and Celtic tribes. The Thracians and Illyrians had been to a great extent Hellenised during the fourth century BC, when the Macedonian empire of Philip and Alexander flourished. Greek colonies had been established along the Adriatic coastlands even earlier. The Celts, who migrated into the Balkans in the fourth century BC and settled mainly in the northern lowlands, became assimilated into the Illyrian community, the chief legacy of their presence being numerous Celtic elements in place names. For a time before the Roman invasions several powerful Illyrian or Graeco-Illyrian kingdoms existed in places as far apart as modern Albania and Macedonia in the south and the upper Sava basin in the north. Remarkable examples of the wealth, power and high cultural attainments of the Illyrians have been found in the excavations of royal tombs. The friezes which decorate the situla discovered at Vače, near present-day Ljubljana, depict scenes of ritual sacrifices, feasts, battles, sport and pastimes which suggest that a highly organised, metal-using society existed in this area in the fifth century BC. There are signs of both Greek and Etruscan influences.

The Illyrians were the first to feel the power of Rome. During the third century BC Roman attacks began on Illyrian tribes settled in the Neretva valley, followed by raids on the Greek cities on the Albanian coast. Most of the coastlands were brought under Roman rule during the Illyrian wars of Octavian in 35–33 BC. Further advances were made following a rising of the Illyrians in 9 BC, and the final subjugation of the Illyrians in the western Balkans was achieved under Tiberius in AD 9. At the same time, Rome extended its rule over Celtic tribes in Serbia and Bulgaria, and by AD 14 the whole of the Balkans south of the Danube was in Roman hands.

The logic of imperialism forced the Romans to extend their frontiers continually, invading territories from which their 'barbarian' enemies