

Alexander Sarantis: *Justinian's Balkan Wars. Campaigning, Diplomacy and Development in Illyricum, Thrace and the Northern World A.D. 527–65*. Cambridge: Francis Cairns 2016 (ARCA: Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs 53). XXVIII, 500 S. 20 Tafeln, 13 Abb. ISBN: 978-0-905205-58-8.

Despite the fact that Justinian's diplomatic and military policies along the entire length of the Roman Empire have been studied extensively as a result of their importance for the configuration of power in the late antique world, only few studies have been devoted to the Balkans, since these provinces have almost always been positioned on the margins of the Empire. Alexander Sarantis' book is the first monograph devoted to the Roman provinces south of the Danube. It covers this neglected topic in the secondary literature and by providing a sharp focus on the Balkan world it proves that this region was not a strategically unimportant backwater of low strategic priority compared to the regions dominated by imperial enemies such as the East (Sasanian Persian Empire), Africa (Vandals) and Italy (Goths). This is a work of long gestation, not least because the author had to familiarize himself with a vast bibliography, a large part of which was in the local languages of the modern Balkans.

More specifically, the book casts light on the historical and archaeological context of the Balkan Peninsula during the reign of Justinian I (527–565), a period in which the Eastern Roman Empire dominated the region in its dealings with "barbarian" groups – a term, which, according to the author, has been divested of its negative connotations (p. 17). The book provides a complete picture of this crucial period of political, diplomatic and military conflicts between the Empire and the representatives of various non-Roman groups. At the same time, the study explores some additional themes such as the Justinianic administrative reforms, the imperial legislative measures, the growing role of ecclesiastic, imperial and local elites, as well as the commercial and industrial activity in the period, since the main aim of the author is to view the military events in a wider historical, political and socio-economic context.

After an introduction in which the aims, general approach and main inferences of the author are laid out, the book is divided into five separate but simultaneously interrelated parts of uneven length, which follow a chronological order: 527–540, 540–552 and 552–565. The first period is presented

in Chapter One and Chapter Two respectively. Specifically, Chapter One (pp. 21–112) draws attention to Justinian's military and diplomatic responses to the emergence of barbarian threats to the Balkan provinces from a number of areas. Huns and Bulgars threatened the territories of the north Black Sea, the Germanic Gepids, Lombards and Heruls, who inhabited the Pannonian lands, put pressure on the northwestern parts of the Illyrian Prefecture, and the Slavic Sklaveni and Antae posed a danger for the regions north of the Lower Danube. Justinian's policy in this early period did not simply consist of the use of proactive military action but also of the instigation of a range of diplomatic agreements and alliances with barbarian groups, which ensured an even greater imperial control over barbarian confederations within the Balkans. The main purpose of this chapter is to underline the imperial interest in the Balkan provinces. This goes against the grain of the current scholarly consensus which, based on the superficial study of the main sources of this period, is leading to the misleading conclusion that the military action in the Balkans was much more modest when compared to that of other theatres of war.

Chapter Two (pp. 113–226) summarizes the key points of the historical overview of the period up to the reign of Justinian (376–527), indicating the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, which caused not only many political, military and economic problems but also reduced imperial control over the Balkans. The impact of the barbarian migrations and invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries was felt in a number of ways: extensive damage to urban settlements, weakening of the central imperial authority over regions in the northern Balkan and the dislocation of the central sovereignty over the military administration of these areas. Justinian undertook a remarkable program of defensive works in order to re-establish imperial control over the Balkan Peninsula. Having at his disposal the hoarded treasures of Anastasius I (491–518), his building project was magnificent. He had numerous heavily defended fortresses erected across the Roman Empire as a response to the barbarian invasions (a sign and consequence of the increasingly centralized imperial administration), while he provided major Balkan cities in mainland regions with monumental walls. This scattered network of fortresses and fortified cities explains why so few towns fell to barbarian raiding parties in this early period.

Chapter Three (pp. 227–324) reconstructs the history of the Balkan Wars during the second period of Justinian's reign (540–552), an era which was

characterized by an economic crisis and a decline of agricultural manpower. Procopius of Caesarea's works – *The History of the Wars*, *Secret History* and *Buildings* – provides the most detailed contemporary record, which among others things helps us understand the character and motivation of Justinian. However, the comparatively scanty information Procopius provides on imperial military campaigns in the Balkans, often colored by a pessimistic and hostile tone, tends to support the impression (challenged by Sarantis) that the Balkans were left vulnerable to the depredations of barbarian groups and did not receive sufficient imperial support in infrastructure. During the mid-Justinianic period, the Emperor had to face raids by the Huns and Antae in the early 540s, a conflict with and rebellion of the Heruls in the mid 540s, the Gepid-Lombard wars and the emergence of the Gepid kingdom of Thorsin, as well as the simultaneous invasions by large forces of Sklaveni and Kutrigur Huns. However, almost none of these incursions would have led to a widespread destruction of major Balkan cities and forts, since Justinian's divide and rule policies and the deployment of massive military forces ensured the strength of central imperial political authority both within and beyond the Balkans.

Chapter Four (pp. 325–374) focuses on the final years of Justinian's reign, when the Emperor tried to respond to a new, powerful barbarian group, the Avars, while simultaneously facing the vigorous Hun attacks. Despite the negative interpretation of Justinian's late years by a number of sixth century literary sources – Agathias, Menander Protector and Malalas —, the emperor responded effectively and successfully by deploying both diplomacy and military force. This is corroborated by the archaeological evidence from his reign which does not show any significant or extensive destruction, abandonment and/or transformation of cities or socio-economic decline in the Balkan provinces related to barbarian attacks. Only a few fortified settlements fell to barbarian invaders, reinforcing the view that Justinian's defensive system held firm in the face of the barbarian raids. Any changes on the ground should be attributed to long-term political, military, religious, administrative and socio-economic changes affecting the Balkan urban and rural communities and not merely to the insecurity caused by barbarian raids in the late Justinianic era.

Finally, Chapter Five (pp. 375–406) covers the imperial responses to the barbarian raids during the reigns of Justinian's successors, Justin II (565–578), Tiberius II Constantine (578–582) and Maurice (582–602), when the East

Roman Empire experienced again a new military danger on all fronts. More specific, in the Balkans, Avar and Slav attacks between the years 565–602 were undoubtedly more damaging than those during the previous reign of Justinian and threatened imperial control over the northern regions of the Empire. Only Maurice tried to re-establish Roman military control in the Lower Danube frontier regions and dealt a range of military defeats on his enemies. After Phocas' rebellion in 602, the Avars launched a new and more aggressive wave of attacks on the northern Balkan provinces, which signaled the outset of the loss of control over these regions, which culminated in the Avar-Persian siege of Constantinople in 626.

In this book, Alexander Sarantis critically illustrates the history of Justinian's Balkan policy, drawing a panorama of this neglected period by discussing almost all the available ancient written sources. The network of Balkan fortifications constructed during the sixth century, provided a defensive system against external threats, in contrast with the western part of the Empire, where the loss of defended strongholds should be associated with the prevailing political weakness. At the same time, the book is not intended to offer a complete survey of the origins of the Slavs, but to examine their ability to carry out frequent raids against the East Roman Empire and to discuss how the Byzantine authorities managed to gain the upper hand in their dealings with hostile groups and how they strengthened central control over the Balkans, supported by Justinian's internal reforms. The need for radical reorganization gave the rise to many of the characteristics that would become typical for the Byzantine society from that moment onwards. Moreover, Alexander Sarantis points out in great detail that much of the previous historical scholarship, relying on textual evidence, hints at a picture of decline or abandonment, which is contradicted by the archaeological record. Thus, the author demonstrates how the interpretation of material culture deviates from the views expressed in the textual sources, a thesis which is central to his approach in this book. However, the book remains mostly a historical narration of the wars and diplomatic efforts, since the archaeological reports and epigraphic evidence is not treated in much detail. It has to be said, however, that even if the recent archaeological evidence has made a significant contribution to reconstructing the period and is particularly valuable for historians, it is still quite sparse. However, the author could have made an effort to use archaeological reports and surveys much more extensively, comparing their results with those of textual sources, rather than exclusively use coin

hoards, which in this book tend to be associated more closely with specific historical events.

The author's aim to cover the gaps in the scholarly coverage the reign of Emperor Justinian in the Balkans is quite ambitious. However, only the continuation of serious archaeological research and the investigation of the historical sources can hope to modify existing interpretations and provide new data to expand our understanding of Justinian's Balkan policy and to offer a clearer analysis of its constituent parts. Alexander Sarantis' comprehensive bibliography makes clear that he continued to gather and incorporate recent scholarship until the end of the editorial procedure of the book. However, an abbreviation list – usually located before the bibliography list – is missing, despite the fact that the author uses shortened forms of book and journal titles, and while there are few inconsistencies in the bibliography: dots and spaces between words are often missing. One last point, which should be mentioned, is that the book is not very well illustrated with maps and plates or plans. It would have been helpful to provide more detailed plans or, at least, plans of some of the areas that were extensively excavated, in order to support a better understanding of historical events that are connected to them. These weaknesses are outweighed by the author's scientific integrity. Alexander Sarantis' book will, no doubt, become a standard work for everyone who works on the Balkans during the reign of Justinian since it provides a serious and complete insight into what was required of the Roman authorities for the successful management of internal and external threats during this era. It sets out a new field for future research, while it revises older and sometimes outdates opinions.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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