The Strategic Role of Thracian Fortifications in the Balkan Wars of Late Antiquity

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Abstract: The strategic role of Thracian cities changed across Late Antiquity thanks to major political events, which resulted in their increasing vulnerability. These events included, in particular, barbarian crossings of the Lower Danube from 376, and the gradual breakdown of the Middle Danube frontier from the late 4th century AD. The first of these developments led to larger numbers of Gothic soldiers in the Diocese of Thrace and the threat of periodic rebellions by these federate troops. The second culminated in the rise of barbarian powers in Pannonia and the Middle Danube capable of launching devastating attacks on eastern Illyricum and Thrace. Because of these military threats, larger and more numerous fortifications sprang up along the Military Highway and Via Egnatia, northern and southern routes into the Haemus Mountains, and in the province of Europa. As well as a ‘defence-in-depth’ system, this network of fortified cities and bases operated as a platform from which imperial armies could launch offensive campaigns against rebellious or invading barbarians.

Key words: Thrace, fortifications, strategy, Roman army, barbarians.

INTRODUCTION

Between Diocletian’s accession to the Roman throne in 284 and Phocas’ usurpation of the throne in 602, the settlement pattern of the Thracian provinces of the Eastern Roman empire underwent major changes. In particular, a series of centrally planned building projects carpeted the eastern Balkans with a large number of fortifications – small forts and watchtowers, fortified cities, and military bases. These defences were much larger than those of the early Roman period. This monumental transformation of the Thracian built landscape is most often explained as a response to military insecurity, caused by the proliferation of threats and attacks by barbarian Germanic, Hun and Slavic tribes based north of the Danube frontier. Accordingly, the construction of fortifications tends to be viewed principally as a defensive measure, designed to protect local populations and resources and to compensate for the lack of military manpower available to the government in Constantinople.

In surveying the strategic role of Thracian walled settlements in Late Antiquity, this paper will argue that these fortifications served an offensive as well as defensive purpose. In particular, large Eastern Roman armies regularly deployed in Thrace must have made use of Thracian fortified settlements and bases in their aggressive campaigns against barbarian raiders and rebels.
Major political-strategic changes post-376

Before examining the military role of Thracian settlements, it will be important to outline the two major political-strategic changes which took place from 376. Before this year, Thracian cities were protected from attack by effective imperial control of the Lower and Middle Danube frontiers. Thanks to energetic frontier campaigns by the Tetrarchic emperors, Constantine’s Gothic peace of 332, and aggressive campaigning in the Middle Danube region by Valens in the late 350s and Valentinian in the mid-370s, Thracian cities did not experience major invasion or destruction during the first three-quarters of the 4th c.4 The majority of trans-Danubian barbarian raids in this period crossed the Middle Danube and involved Sarmatian and Quadi tribes.

However, in 376 the first of two major strategic changes took place which made Thracian cities more vulnerable to attack and devastation. This resulted from the crossing of the Lower Danube by large numbers of Tervingi and Greuthungi Goths, Huns and Alans in that year5. There is no need to recount the events of 376-382, which are well known. To summarise, a series of Gothic rebellions, the Gothic victory over the Eastern Roman army at the Battle of Hadrianopolis in 378, and the Roman-Gothic peace of 382 culminated in the settlement in Thrace of large numbers of barbarian tribes on a permanent basis. Dotted across the Thracian landscape, these ‘Gothic’ and other barbarian federate troops always had the potential for rebellion thereafter – the most famous of these included Gainas’ revolt of 399-400, the era of the two Theoderics between 471 and 488, and the rebellion of Vitalian from 514 to 5176.

The second and perhaps more serious strategic change resulted from the collapse of the Middle Danube frontier from the late 4th to mid-5th centuries7. This was accompanied by the weakening of imperial control over the majority of Western Illyricum, as well as over the northern, Dacian diocese of eastern Illyricum (fig. 1). In short, the mid-370s was the last time a Roman emperor devoted significant political energy to defending the Middle Danube frontier. Subsequent civil wars during the 380s and 390s distracted the Eastern and Western Roman governments from defending this limes at a time when it was facing great pressure from barbarian tribes arriving either from Trajanic Dacia to the east, or from the Balkan provinces to the southeast. While Eastern Illyricum was handed over to the Eastern Roman empire in 395, Western Illyricum and, specifically, the diocese of Pannonia, was gradually abandoned by the Western Roman government to Hun and Goth tribes. The Stilicho-Alaric wars and the crossing of the Middle Danube by Radagaisus’ Goths in the 400s exacerbated the crisis.

From the mid-5th c., major barbarian powers took advantage of the power vacuum which had resulted from this breakdown of imperial control in north-western Illyricum. Successive barbarian states established in Pannonia included Attila’s Huns from the 430s-453, the Goths from 504-536, the Gepids and the Lombards from 536-568, and the Avars from 5688. The rise of these barbarian ‘super’-states coincided with the worst invasions of the Balkans in Late Antiquity and meant that Thracian cities became more vulnerable to attack. Indeed, the majority of barbarian raids on the eastern Balkans in the 5th and 6th

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5 Kulikowski 2007, chs. 6-8; Heather 1991, chs. 4-6.
c. emanated from Pannonia. These were perpetrated by Huns in the 440s, Sclaveni and Kutrigur Huns in the 540s and 550s, and Avars in the 570s-590s. By starting their journeys from the Middle Danube region, these barbarian raiders were able to by-pass the Romans’ Lower Danube fortifications and gain access via over-land routes to the province of Upper Moesia and, from there, the Military Highway to Thrace (Sarantis 2009, 32-33; 2016, 276-277). On their raids, the Avars also followed routes across the Haemus Mountains into the Lower Danube plain before crossing the Haemus again to enter the Thracian Plain.

It should be noted that a smaller number of barbarian attacks crossed the Lower Danube east of the Carpathians and entered the Lower Danube plain. These included raids by Bulgars in the 490s, Antae in 520 and the early 540s, and Huns in 408, 528 and 559. However, these were exceptions. By and large the imperial authorities defended the Lower Danube frontier between the Iron Gates and the Black Sea Delta exceptionally well in this period.

**Changes to settlement patterns**

In light of these strategic developments and Thracian cities’ greater exposure to attack by barbarian raiders, the fortification work I mentioned earlier started to gather pace. The majority of the fortification works were constructed during the reigns of Theodosius II, Anastasius and Justinian. Whereas the Danube frontier had been the main object of imperial fortification programmes in the earlier 4th c., the 5th to 6th c. also witnessed the fortification or re-fortification of major provincial cities away from the frontier, as well as the construction of fortresses and watchtowers. As is well-documented, these featured the impressively thick and tall *opus mixtum*-style defences as seen at Bulgarian sites such as Nesebar and Hisarya.

Smaller forts were also constructed away from major routes so that, by the time Procopius published the *Buildings* in 554, we can speak of a three-tiered Balkan fortification system. This consisted of first: major urban fortifications, fortresses along major routes, and cross walls, second: the walls of secondary provincial cities and more minor forts, and third: what might be termed ‘rural shelters.’

It should be noted that Thrace and southern Illyricum were prioritised over northern Illyricum when it came to this fortification work.
Only during the reign of Justinian was there a coordinated attempt to shore up the defences of the central-northern Illyrian Dacian diocese to the same extent.

**The regional strategic role of Thracian fortified settlements**

This brings us to the strategic role played by these fortified bases and settlements in Roman-barbarian military encounters in Thrace during Late Antiquity. The argument made most regularly by modern scholars is that fortified cities and forts were refuges for administrative and military officials, churchmen, churches, and local populations\(^\text{13}\). Meanwhile, surrounding regions were abandoned to the depravities of barbarian raiders and rebels.

It cannot be doubted that fortified Thracian settlements contributed to what might be termed a ‘defence-in-depth’ regional strategy. The first line of defence was provided by frontier fortifications and fortress cities situated on the southern banks of the Lower Danube in the provinces of Lower Moesia and Scythia Minor (fig. 2). These were mostly successful in preventing or deterring barbarian crossings of the Danube frontier. For example, after 376, there were no major successful crossings until Uldin the Hun’s attack in 408. In the interim, numerous barbarian attempts at crossing the river were stopped, the Gothic raids of 380 and 386 being prominent examples (Heather 1991, 160, 315).

Behind the Danube frontier, routes leading southwards were defended by forts and major fortified cities. Marcianopolis and Nicopolis ad Istrum were among the major bases in the southern Lower Danube plain\(^\text{14}\). The Haemus Mountain passes further south were also defended by watchtowers and forts\(^\text{15}\). As I have already mentioned, most attacks on Thrace came from Illyricum. This meant that defending the Trajan’s Gate pass was as important as defending the Lower Danube frontier. This would explain the evidence for defences in this area, such as the fortress of Markova Mehana (fig. 3).

After the Lower Danube frontier region north of the Haemus Mountains and the Trajan’s Gate Pass, the other major militarised, strategically vital zone in Late antique Thrace was focused on the Long Wall of Thrace and regions just to the west of this massive fortification, which was probably erected in the reign of Anastasius (Crow 1995; fig. 4). Key forts west of the Long Wall included Tzurullum and Drizipera on the Military Highway and Apri on the Via Egnatia (Crow 2002; Pralong 1988). This region was also home to the imperial horse pastures, as well as to major ports east of the Long Wall, such as Selymbria (Procop. Vand. 3.12.6 on the horse pastures). Only a minority of barbarian attacks on Thrace breached the Long Wall defences. These included invasions by the Huns in 539 and 559 and the Avars in 626\(^\text{16}\).

Between the three major militarised zones just mentioned – the Lower Danube frontier, the Long Wall ‘region’, and the Trajan’s Gate Pass – sat the Thracian and Rhodope plains (fig. 5). These flat areas were dotted with major cities, all of which acquired sizeable fortifications in Late Antiquity. Some of these fortress cities, such as Diocletianopolis in Thrace and Maximianopolis in Rhodope, were built in the Tetrarchic period\(^\text{17}\).

The strategic role performed by these cities was to delay barbarian raiders from moving across these plains and making their way further.

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\(^{13}\) See notes 2-3 above.  

\(^{14}\) Nicopolis ad Istrum: Poulter 1995 and 2007c.  

\(^{15}\) The fort of Vavovo Kale is a good example: Crow 2007, 402.  


towards Constantinopolis. This strategy made sense because most barbarian raiders, especially ‘Germanic’ groups, were not very good at besieging fortified settlements. The Goths failed, for example, to capture Hadrianopolis and other Thracian cities in the aftermath of their great victory at the Battle of Hadrianopolis in 378 (Heather 1991, 149-150). Even the Huns and the Avars, who were adept at siege warfare, struggled to capture heavily fortified major cities such as Augusta Traiana and Hadrianopolis (e.g. Theoph. Sim. 2.16.12-17.3 on the Avar siege of Hadrianopolis in 587). Even though these cities did not possess large military garrisons, the strength of their walls meant that they could be successfully defended by non-military populations (Pillon 2005, 67-74). Civilians thus played a prominent role in defending Topirus when it was attacked by the Sclaveni in 550 (Procop. Goth. 7.38.9-19).

In addition to delaying the progress of barbarian raiders through their numerous heavily fortified cities, the Rhodope and Thracian plains were important strategically to the Eastern Romans because...
their flat topography was ideal for engaging barbarian raiders in battle. As is well known, the training, discipline and tactical awareness of Roman soldiers meant that they preferred to fight battles against barbarians, especially Hun and Slavic groups, in open terrain. Roman battlefield successes in Thracia, for example, took place in 528 against the Huns (Malalas 18.21) and 551 against the Sclaveni (Procop. Goth. 7.40.34-45). Of course this strategy could go wrong if insufficient preparations were made for military engagement – as was the case prior to the ill-fated Battle of Hadrianopolis in 378 (Austin / Rankov 1995, 241-43; Burns 1973).

Within the imperial regional strategy for Thrace, the Thracian Plain can, therefore, be viewed as a ‘holding pen’ between the militarised zones of northern and south-eastern Thrace. Within this ‘holding pen’ barbarian raiders could be contained, delayed and, ultimately, either defeated or pressurised into leaving the region.

The role of Thracian fortified settlements in campaign strategy

As well as playing an important role within Roman regional defensive strategy, Thracian fortified settlements were crucial to the success of offensive imperial military campaigns. Even if we assume that some fortified cities did not have a regular military purpose, there is no reason to assume that they could not have played a role in military campaigns whenever these took place. As well as defending civilian populations and their resources, these fortified bases provided a platform from which imperial armies could aggressively harry, wear down and eventually defeat invading or rebelling barbarian armies. They could do this by supplying imperial armies with accommodation, intelligence and provisions. Imperial troops thus enjoyed an enormous logistical advantage over barbarian raiders, who were ill-equipped to besiege fortified centres and thereby access the resources within.

It is sometimes argued that the lack of obvious military structures in Balkan fortified settlements dating to the 5th – 6th centuries AD means that the Roman army was not present at these sites as it had been in earlier periods of Roman history. It is indeed true that we have more examples of clearly planned military forts with barracks, granaries and principia up to the 4th century. The apparent absence of the Roman army from the Thracian settlement pattern from the

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Fig. 4. South-eastern Thrace: Europa, the Long Wall region and the Thracian Chersonese. Map designed by A. Sarantis and produced by C. Garcia and A. George

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19 Rizos 2011, 77-84, 115-116, 180 stresses the lack of ‘regular’ military features in 5th to 6th century AD fortified cities and bases. Curta 2013, 838 on the difficulty of telling the difference between civilian and military settlements by the 6th century.
5th century might reinforce the idea that Eastern Roman governments were willing to rely mainly on fortifications and diplomacy to protect the Balkans, rather than on large armies.

However, textual sources demonstrate that large Roman armies were billeted and campaigned across Thrace in Late Antiquity. First, administrative documents such as the Notitia Dignitatum confirm that the Thracian field army, one of the praesental armies, and frontier and naval forces were stationed in the Thracian provinces. The optimum number of Roman soldiers in the region was ca. 75,000 men and this figure does not even take into account federate troops, which manned the frontier provinces and were also based in Thracia, south of the Haemus in some periods.

While this figure undoubtedly fluctuated across Late Antiquity, repeated references in contemporary narrative histories to field and frontier divisions operating in the Balkan provinces reinforce the impression that this was one of the more heavily militarised regions in the Roman empire. These histories record the deployment of large Roman armies against barbarian raiders in Thrace, including campaigns against the Goths from 378 to 382, Attila’s raiders in 443 and 447 (Thompson 1996, 86-103), the sons of Attila in the 460s, Vitalian in the 510s (See n.6 above on his rebellion), Huns, Bulgars and Sclaveni during the Justinianic period, and Avars in the 580s and 590s (Whitby 1988, 156-165; Pohl 1988, 135-159).

When they give us numbers, histories such as Ammianus
Marcellinus’ *Res Gestae* and Procopius’ *History of the Wars* show that the Roman armies involved in these missions were between 10 and 30,000 strong (Whitby 1995, 73-74; Jones 1964, 685; Treadgold 2005, 9; Parnell 2012, 11, n. 44). Even when these sources fail to mention the size of Roman armies, the high status and number of the generals they refer to would imply that the forces in question were not small.

Where were these armies based though? First, settlements with an ostensibly military purpose were erected in the 5th – 6th century. The fortress of Markova Mehana, mentioned above, is a good example. Second, there is plenty of artefactual evidence from forts and cities which can be associated with the Roman army. This includes the remains of weaponry and military equipment, coins and inscriptions. Third, soldiers could have been accommodated in buildings that were not purpose-built for them. This is demonstrated by legislative texts requiring civilians to give over part of their houses to campaigning soldiers (*Cod. Theod.* 7.8.2-16). There is thus no reason why we cannot envisage ‘residential’ areas of Thracian cities accommodating Roman soldiers, even if this was only on a periodic basis.

Fourth, it is possible that soldiers were based in extramural camps or barracks which have not survived. These are likely to have existed in militarised regions along frontiers or in the vicinity of cross walls. The Long Wall of Thrace is a good example. Indeed, *Novella* 26, announcing the creation of a new administrative official in charge of the Long Wall region, makes clear that this cross wall was to serve as a base from which army units could be sent into other parts of Thrace to attack barbarian raiders. In other words, it was not only a defensive structure. Forts along the cross wall and situated on roads leading away from it, as well as military camps could have accommodated the soldiers in question.

I think we might thus imagine that the majority of the ca. 75,000-strong Roman army was stationed on a long-term basis in regions adjacent to the Long Wall, and in the Lower Danube frontier zone. These forces could then be sent into the Thracian and Rhodope Plains whenever these came under attack and were billeted on the civilian populations of these regions whenever necessary.

**Conclusions**

To sum up, physical changes to Thracian settlements across Late Antiquity reflected not only socio-economic and demographic developments, but changing strategic realities following the Gothic immigration of 376. In particular, the late 4th to late 6th centuries witnessed a proliferation of serious barbarian threats, from groups settled outside of the Balkan provinces. However, another major development was the increasing Roman militarisation of the region – through the deployment of large armies as well as the construction of fortified bases and settlements. Indeed, the Battle of Hadrianopolis in 378 marks the beginning of a period in which Roman armies were regularly sent into the central and southern Thracian provinces to deal with barbarian raids.

We need to consider, therefore, that Thracian fortified bases and settlements were not only intended to perform a defensive function, providing shelter for local populations, and capable of holding out when besieged by barbarian armies. They also operated as a platform

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26 For example, the Roman army deployed against the Sclaveni in early 551 was commanded by Constantianus, Aratius, Nazares, Justin, son of Germanus, John the Glutton and Scholasticus, a eunuch of the imperial palace (*Procop. Goth.* 7.40.34-45).

27 E.g., Zahariade 2006, 182, on the military equipment evidence from Scythia Minor. Large numbers of coin finds usually indicate the presence of the army, which was paid by the state. On coins in the northern Balkans: Guest 2007. Inscriptions referring to military men at eastern Thracian forts can be found in Beševliev 1964, e.g., 58-59, Nr. 87. For a more detailed discussion and synthesis of the evidence: Sarantis 2016, 188-198.

28 Crow / Ricci 1997, esp. 246-253. Wiewiorowski 2012, 282 argues that the Long Wall garrison alone could have numbered 3-4,000 soldiers.
from which Roman armies could campaign aggressively against invading barbarians.

The strategic approach to the eastern Balkans adopted by the government at Constantinopolis was ultimately successful. Barbarian invaders across Late Antiquity, from the late 3rd to early 7th centuries were either defeated and repelled from the Balkans, or settled in Thrace and recruited by imperial armies. Even though terrible crises occurred from time to time, resulting temporarily in the loss of imperial control over certain Balkan regions, the Lower Danube remained the frontier between the empire and barbarian groups for the majority of the period. Indeed, when Justinian died in 565, imperial authority in Thrace was as strong as ever. It was the strategic decision taken by his successors to focus on the eastern frontier rather than defending the Balkans from the Avars, the greatest barbarian threat since Attila’s Hun empire, that eroded imperial control over the majority of the Thracian provinces between the 570s and 590s. While the emperor Maurice attempted to reverse this development in the 590s, his dethroning by Phocas in 602, the last Great War of Antiquity with the Persian empire subsequently, and the rise of Islam from the late 620s, meant that the majority of the Thracian provinces had fallen out of imperial control by the reigns of Justinian II (685-695, 705-711).

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