

Early Medieval Serbs in the Balkans

Reconsideration of the Evidence

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Abstract. This paper discusses the problem of the appearance of the Serb ethnonym in the Balkans, as evidenced in the ninth-century Frankish Royal Annals and the mid-tenth-century Byzantine treaty *De Administrando Imperio*. Written evidence is analysed together with available archaeological information in order to criticize currently dominating ideas concerning the Serb migration in the seventh century, as well as to offer different perspectives on the origins of the early medieval Serb ethnonym in the Balkans.

Keywords: Serbs; Balkans; early medieval; migration; medieval ethnography

Understanding the appearance and spread of the Serb ethnonym in the early medieval Balkans remains an important problem for both archaeologists and historians. Current explanations and popular discourse, rooted in national-romantic historiographical traditions, imagine that this happened as a consequence of the arrival of a large ethnic group of Serbs migrating from East-Central Europe in the seventh-century Balkans. The premise is based exclusively on the testimony provided in the much later, mid-tenth-century Byzantine treaty known as *De Administrando Imperio* (DAI). The same source, taken in conjunction with the ninth-century Frankish Royal Annals, implies that Serb ethnicity spread throughout the east Adriatic hinterland, much wider than the area of Ras in modern Sandžak (southwestern Serbia), where the core of the early medieval Raška Serb state was established.¹ These premises have very seldom been questioned in modern scholarship, unlike the similar story

1 The literature, mostly historiographical, is extensive, and it is not necessary to recount it here in more detail, more recently, e.g., Komatina, *Konstantin Porfirogenit*, 210–29; Aleksić, *Srpske zemlje*; Fokt, “Serbowie”; Maksimović, “Constantine VII”; Živković, “O takozvanoj Hronici”; Zhikh, “Migratsiya,” etc.

of Croat migration, which was also present in the *DAI* but experienced much more concerted criticism.²

This paper will address written and material evidence in order to discuss the question of the Serb arrival as well as the spread of the Serb ethnonym in the ninth-century Balkans.

The arrival of the Serbs

The only testimony about the arrival of the Serbs in the Balkans comes from chapter 32 of the *DAI*. The authorship of this treaty was traditionally ascribed to the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, but more recent scholarship very convincingly points out that it must have been the work of a whole team of scholars directed by the emperor who wrote only some parts.³ The story places the origins of the Serbs (*Sérbloi*) in Central Europe, where “unbaptized Serbia” is located in Boïki, “beyond the Turks” (Hungarians) and “next to the Franks and Great/White Croatia.” After an unnamed Serb ruler dies, one of his also unnamed two sons takes “half of the population” from “unbaptized Serbia” in order to claim the protection of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641). The emperor personally receives the brother and gives him the area of “Serblia” (Servia in Kozani in modern Greek Macedonia) in the “*theme* of Thessalonica” to settle in. After some time, the Serbs decide to go back and do so after obtaining Heraclius’ permit. However, after crossing the Danube on their way back, the Serbs suddenly change their mind again. They ask the emperor, through the Byzantine strateg “in Belgrade,” to be resettled somewhere else. The emperor grants the Serbs the lands “desolated by the Avars,” which were in Constantine VII’s times known as Paganía (Narentani), Zahumlje, Travunia, the land of Canaliti and “baptized” Serbia, stretching approximately from the river Cetina in Croatia all the way to Ras and its surroundings in southwestern Serbia. Finally, the emperor sends priests from Rome to baptize his new subjects. Then, this seventh-century narrative jumps through time into the ninth century by recounting the names of four Serb princes who ruled in succession from father to son (Boïseslav, Rodoslav, Prosiġoïis, Blastimer), the last one dated to the time of the Bulgar khan Presian (836–852). They are presented as direct patrilinear descendants of the unnamed brother who led the Serbs in the times of Heraclius.⁴ The rest

2 Alimov, “Izvestiya”; Pohl, *The Avars* 315–16; Curta, *Eastern Europe*, 69–71 and Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 90–98 with the difference that Kardaras believes that the story is “probably true” (especially 97–98).

3 Ševčenko, “Re-reading,” 184–95; Holmes, “Byzantine Political Culture,” 69–72; Németh, *The Excerpta Constantiniana*, 131–32; Shchavalev, “Treatise,” 688–701.

4 *DAI*, 32.1–38.

of chapter 32 is a complicated story of the descendants of Blastimer fighting for power and balancing Serbia between the Bulgars and Byzantines. The chapter finally ends with the list of inhabited settlements in “baptized Serbia” and the small land of Bosona, which is considered to be part of Serbia.

It is generally agreed that this chapter was based on information derived from a genuine Serb tradition, with Živković’s argument that the chapter is composed of three sources, including the source he called *De conversione Croatorum et Serborum* allegedly written by Anastasius the Librarian in Rome around 878, rightly rejected today. The most accepted opinion is that the Serb tradition (called in Serbian historiography *Chronicle of the Serb Rulers*) was recorded before the end of 944, and with some minor interventions reproduced in its entirety in chapter 32.⁵ Most recently, Komatina pointed out that the impact of the author(s) of the *DAI* (he himself ascribes authorship solely to Constantine VII) on the original *Chronicle of the Serb Rulers* was much more significant. He compared it to editorial interventions made by the author(s) of the *DAI* on the Croat *origo gentis*, recorded in chapter 30 and edited in chapter 31. While rightly suspecting that parts mentioning the agency of Emperor Heraclius are added to the story of the seventh-century wanderings and settlement of the Serbs, Komatina still sees this event as essentially authentic. He also makes the important proposal that this original *Chronicle of the Serb Rulers* was composed at the court of the Serbian prince Časlav (Tzeëslav from *DAI*) and was transmitted to Constantinople from there.⁶

As correctly observed by Komatina, we can understand the Serb chapter by looking into the story of the Croats’ arrival recorded in chapters 30 and 31 of the *DAI*. Chapter 30, generally agreed to be either a later addition or work of a different author to the one who wrote chapter 31, brings forward parts of an undated Croat *origo gentis*, which tells the story of a migration led by five brothers (Kloukas, Lobelos, Kosentzis, Mouchlo, and Krobotos) and two sisters (Touga and Bouga) from White “unbaptized” Croatia located “beyond Bavaria” on the Frankish borders in Central-Eastern Europe. On their way, the Croats defeated the Avars, after several years of fighting, before conquering Dalmatia and settling there.⁷ However, chapter 31 tells a different story, deleting the brothers and sisters from the plot and attributing the Croat defeat of the Avars to the leadership and approval of emperor Heraclius, whom the Croats initially asked for protection and approval to settle. Here, the Croat leader is stated to be the unnamed father of a historically unknown Porgas, while the Croat homeland of White “unbaptized” Croatia is located “beyond

5 Ostrogorski, “Porfirogenitova Hronika”; Maksimović, “Constantine VII”; Contra Živković, “O takozvanoj Hronici,” 314–17; *De conversione*, 149–51, 197–223.

6 Komatina, *Konstantin Porfirogenit*, 227, 264–71.

7 *DAI*, 30.61–75.

Turkey, next to Francia,” neighboring “unbaptized Serbs.” The chapter also states that these events occurred *before* the Serbs asked for Heraclius’ protection and adds that the Croats were baptized by the priests from Rome sent by the emperor.⁸ In the Croat case, we most likely have fragments of a genuine and undated Croat *origo gentis* in chapter 30, and an ‘official’ imperial version that inserts Heraclius in chapter 31, loosely referencing the Croat migration story in a brand new historical construct.⁹ Chapter 30 contradicts the narrative of what Howard-Johnston calls the “Balkan dossier” in the *DAI*, starting with chapter 29 and ending with chapter 36, so it is possible that it was composed later and added to the manuscript.¹⁰

This contradictory information about the origins of the Croats has given rise to more recent discussions supporting the idea of a later arrival of the Croats around 800. This idea was first proposed by Croatian historian Lujko Margetić in the late 1970s.¹¹ However, it took over two decades before a group of archaeologists and historians working on the exhibition “Croats and Carolingians” held in 1999 in Split utilized a combination of written and material evidence in the exhibition catalog to argue that the Croats migrated to modern-day Dalmatia in the late 790s/early 800s from Central Eastern Europe. They viewed the Croats as a small gentile elite group with followers, arriving within the context of the Carolingian–Byzantine conflict in the eastern Adriatic. The well-supported sudden change in the material culture of early ninth-century Dalmatia, particularly the emergence of western Carolingian artifacts and “warrior burials” with weapons, was used to support this idea.¹² Although the argument still does not represent scholarly consensus, the ideas that there was no Croat migration in the seventh century and that the Croats migrated as an elite group are starting to gain ground.¹³

8 *DAI*, 31.1–25, while more recent literature disputes the historicity of Porgas: Milošević, “Tko je Porin?”; Alimov, “Khorvaty.” To be sure, the mention of Porgas and his father might indicate the existence of at least two different stories of origin amongst the Croats.

9 Dzino, “Local knowledge.”

10 Howard-Johnston, “The *De Administrando*,” 314. See also Ančić, “Zamišljanje tradicija” on possible later dating of chapter 30, in his opinion, based on imagined traditions developed in the context of the Croat court in the 960s–970s.

11 Margetić, “Konstantin Porfirogenet.”

12 Milošević, ed., *Hrvati i Karolinzi*, elaborated later by some of the contributors to the exhibition catalog: e.g., Milošević, “The arrival of the Croats”; Ančić, “Migration or Transformation.” See on the exhibition, its genesis, and impact in Dzino, Milošević, and Vedriš, eds., *Migration, Interaction and Connectivity*, especially the introduction and the contributions of Dzino and Vedriš.

13 E.g. Alimov, *Etnogenez khorvatov*; Pohl, *The Avars*, 311–15; Budak, *Hrvatska povijest*, 86–113; Dzino, *From Justinian*, 156–65, 186–88. It is also worth mentioning Sokol, *Medieval Jewelry*, who also argues for the late arrival of the Croats but portrays them as a people rather than an elite group. Additionally, Curta, *Eastern Europe*, 65–69 generally questions the notion of migration.

The Serb migration story could also have some fragments of genuine Serb *origo gentis* in chapter 32, but this is much more difficult to ascertain as we have only the ‘official’ imperial version which corresponds to chapter 31.¹⁴ The use of the term “*Sérblos/Sérbloi*” (plural) in the *DAI* corresponds with the Serb self-identification recorded in later medieval documents as *Срѣблинѣ* (*Srblin*, nom. sing.) and indeed might suggest that the authors of the *DAI* had a genuine Serb tradition at their disposal.¹⁵ Still, there are indications that whatever stood in as the original version was edited when chapter 32 was written. For example, there is a striking similarity between the description of the Croat homeland location in the edited chapter 31 (beyond “Turks,” next to Francia and “unbaptized” Serbs) and the Serb homeland location in chapter 32 (beyond “Turkey,” neighbors to Francia and Great/“unbaptized” Croatia). Chapter 30 locates the Croatian homeland in different terms without referencing the Serbs (“beyond Bavaria”), adding later that these “White” Croats are subjects to the Franks and friends with the “Turks” (again meaning the Hungarians).

The part of chapter 32 which is related to the times of Heraclius is nonsensical when analysed in more detail, and there are quite a few elements there suggesting the tenth century as a time of composition. A prime example is the mention of *thema* Thessalonika, which does not exist in the seventh century. Similarly, the settlement Servia in Kozani (modern Greece) is unknown from the sixth and seventh century evidence such as itineraries (including Anonymous of Ravenna), and the first time the name is mentioned is as a seat of a bishopric in only the early tenth century.¹⁶ Furthermore, the name of the settlement on the confluence of the Sava and Danube in the early seventh century is Singidunum, with the term “Belgrade” first attested in the letter of Pope John VIII from 878. Singidunum is mentioned in the last years of Maurice’s reign when the Byzantines recaptured it from the Avars in 595 and turned it into a military base, but it was never a seat of the Byzantine governor in Late Antiquity.¹⁷

14 Argued in e.g., Komatina, *Konstantin Porfirogenit*, 227–28, 266. On the other hand, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 95, thinks that chapter 32 shows no separate tradition of the Serb *origo gentis*.

15 Bošković, “Srbliji i Srbi”; Živković, *De conversione*, 151–52; Komatina, *Konstantin Porfirogenit*, 218.

16 *Notitiae*, 7.300 (p. 278). Traditional attempts to establish the presence of the Serbs in Greece through topography (e.g., Loma, “Neki slavistički,” 117) are problematic, while the connection of the bishop of Gordoserbon in Bythinia with the Serbs is at very least – suspicious. It certainly cannot be linked with the resettlement of the Slavs in Asia Minor by Justinian II 688–689 (Komatina, “Settlement”) because the bishopric is attested in *Notitiae*, 1.183 (p. 208), composed around 660 as shown in Jankowiak, “Notitia 1.”

17 *Epist. Ioh.* 66 (p. 60.22–30) – the letter of pope John VIII; Theoph. Sim., 7.11.7–8; 8.1.11; Theophanes, 277.8–10, 278.13–17, 281.21–24—Singidunum in the 590s.

The story of the Serbs wandering the Balkans, repeatedly asking Heraclius to approve their settlement is also hard to believe, as is the timeline suggested in chapters 31–32:

- the Avars ravage western and central Balkans
- the Croats arrive and expel the Avars
- the Serbs arrive to Greece
- the Serbs depart Greece (after some time)
- the Serbs change their mind somewhere around Belgrade, still controlled by the Byzantines
- the Serbs are resettled throughout central and western Balkans

This means that all these events should have happened within a single decade after Heraclius took the throne in 610 and before the Byzantine withdrawal from the Danube in the early-mid 620s. Knowing that the Croat historical memories were edited to insert the Byzantine emperor from the seventh century as a primary subject and actor in the narrative of the events from chapter 31, it is very likely that a similar thing happened with the Serb migration story, which might indeed have been part of a so-called *Chronicle of the Serb Rulers*. The part describing the Serb wanderings in the seventh-century Balkans does not seem to be part of their tradition at all, but rather a narrative composed in the tenth century by the authors of the *DAI* in order to reinforce Byzantine claims on this part of the world. This is not surprising:

“...Byzantium had a conception of historical writing wholly different from our own. If it was standard authorial practice to alter accounts so as to present a more colorful portrait of people and their characters, to shift events, deeds, speeches, and sayings both in time and space, and to deploy anonymous quotations in order for an author to demonstrate his own erudition and to satisfy that of his listeners and readers, readers, then Byzantine historical writing can no longer be regarded as comparable to today’s.”¹⁸

It was a carefully plotted text which used the similarity in the names between the settlement of Servia and the Serbs to place the Serbs in Greece. *DAI* even calls Servia “Serblia” to better correspond with the ethnonym *Sérbloi* used there. The actual name of this settlement, recorded in the early tenth century *Notitia* 7, which pre-dates *DAI* by some half a century, is Servia. The choice of emperor Heraclius as an agent of the events in quasi-historical narratives of the *DAI* was not accidental. This emperor was remembered by the following generations as a hero who saved the Empire from collapse and was readily credited with real or invented achievements and critical decisions.¹⁹

18 Ralph-Johannes, “Reality and invention,” quote from 209.

19 Budak, *Prva stoljeća* 64–65; Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 318–21; Curta, “Emperor Heraclius,” 132; Alimov, “Izvestiya,” 221.

The story of the Serb arrival also seems less plausible when one attempts to prove it as a historical fact by referencing supposed migrations occurring in the seventh century. Migrations from East-Central and Central Europe to the Balkans in the first half of the seventh century could not be established in the archaeological or written record. In fact, modern scholarship thinks that either the migrations went the other way—from the lower Danube to East-Central Europe—or sees them as a long-term process of cultural contact and small-scale migrations going from the lower Danube towards Central Europe. The beginning of this cultural interaction and/or migration cannot be dated before the very late sixth century.²⁰ Another problem is represented by the lack of consistent archaeological evidence that would attest to settlements belonging to the migrants moving across the Danube towards the central Balkans. While cultural discontinuity and depopulation are clearly visible in the seventh and eighth centuries, the evidence points to very limited migrant settlement at best.²¹

The first population movements across the Sava-Danube line in modern-day Serbia are securely dateable to only the later seventh century by the foundations of new sunken-huts settlements. These settlements correspond chronologically with three new settlements south of Sava in the northernmost part of the former province of Dalmatia in modern Bosnia and Herzegovina.²² The archaeological evidence in Ras, where the early medieval “baptized Serbs” are located and where we can safely locate the core of early medieval Serbia, also reveals no evidence of seventh-century migrants. Suspected traces of cremation burials placed on top of mounds in this area, which could indicate the presence of a new population, are dateable only from the ninth century onwards. Such a burial custom has no parallels elsewhere in this area except for a single find of a pyre on top of a mound without human remains in Sultići near Konjic, in modern Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some similarities can be noticed between these and the contemporary burials of the western Slavs west of the river Bug, but poor data from Ras makes it difficult to elaborate on this link further.²³ Finally, the story from the *DAI* implies that the Serbs were a large ethnic group with a sizeable population, which was able to settle the areas between the river Cetina and Ras in the second quarter of the seventh century. The appearance of such a large

20 E.g., different points argued in Dulnicz, *Frühe Slawen*, 275–87; Profantová, “Cultural discontinuity”; Pohl, *Avars*, 150–62; Curta, *Slavs in the Making*.

21 Bugarski and Radišić, “The Central Balkans,” 91–95, 99; Ivanišević and Bugarski, “Post-antique,” 9

22 Džino, *From Justinian*, 135–36.

23 Premović-Aleksić, “Istraživanje,” 306; Premović-Aleksić, *Arheološka karta*, 459–61, 535–36; Špehar, *Centralni Balkan*, 110–13 (Ras); Anđelić, “Dva srednjevjekovna” (Sultići), cf. Džino, *From Justinian*, 179–80, and Aleksić, *Srpske zemlje*, 260, 324–27.

migrant population would have left a consistent footprint in the seventh-century archaeological record of these areas. However, the existing evidence cannot confirm the presence of such a sizeable and homogeneous migrant group in this period.²⁴

Chasing the location of Boïki, the original Serb homeland provided in the *DAI*, is equally problematic and futile as it relies on more or less inventive re-readings of the *DAI* combined with palaeolinguistics, reminiscent of approaches in nineteenth-century scholarship.²⁵ It is indeed likely that the Serbs migrated into the central Balkans after the seventh century, probably after the demise of the Avar qaganate at the end of the eighth century, but we currently have very little hard evidence to support this with as the regions where early medieval sources located the Serbs in the Balkans are very poorly archaeologically explored. It is equally hypothetically possible that their migration might have happened in the mid/late eighth century, with the agency of the Bulgars, coming from the eastern Balkans.²⁶ The area of Ras, the center of the Serb early medieval state evidenced in the sources, is also poorly excavated. Apart from the fragmentary evidence of new burial rites dateable from the ninth century onwards and these contacts with the Bulgars, the rest of the archaeological finds point to a rise in complex social structures in the second half of the ninth century through the renovation of the late antique fortresses at Postenje and Gradina above Pazarište, as well as the construction of the early medieval church of St Peter in Ras (probably on the place of the earlier early medieval cremation burials over an Iron Age burial mound), as well as the contemporary renovation of the neighboring fort Gradina in Vrsenice.²⁷

When removing the narrative related to the seventh century, the Serb tradition, or *Chronicle of the Serb Rulers* as it is known in historiography, presents a more logical structure which, after an undated migration from Boïki, connects the unnamed legendary leader with four generations of Serb princes: Boïseslav, Rodoslav, Prosigois, and Blastimer. That the first three princes are historical figures is not impossible, but the description of bitter fights between the descendants of

24 Džino, *From Justinian*, 116–39; Džino, *Early Medieval Hum and Bosnia*, 111–23; Bugarski and Radišić, “The Central Balkans,” 91–95, 99.

25 Recently: Komatina, *Konstantin Porfirogenit*, 211–14; Aleksić, *Srpske zemlje*, 21–31, on a trace of much older discussions, as, e.g., Šafařík, *Slovanské starožitnosti*, 259–61; Rački, “Biela Hrvatska,” 151–54; Labuda, *Pierwsze państwo*, 206, etc.

26 Komatina (“The Slavs”) suggests that the Bulgars resettled some Slavic tribes in the west, although this does not imply that the Serbs were amongst them. Radišić (“Archaeological testimonies”) finds more substantial archaeological traces of Bulgar interaction with the early medieval central Balkans, including Ras, although this evidence might relate to the ninth and tenth-century Bulgar political influence.

27 Popović, *Tvrđava Ras*; Popović and Bikić, *Vrsenice*; Popović, “Preispitivanja”; Špehar, *Centralni Balkan*, 81–92, 144–45; Bugarski and Radišić, “The Central Balkans,” 97–98; Ivanišević and Bugarski, “Post-antique,” 9–16; Babić, “Biography.”

Blastimer makes it unlikely that they represent four different generations, and that power was directly transmitted from father to son. However, Boiseslav, Rodoslav, and Prosigois are not so important and only serve as a genealogical link between the migration leader and the most important figure for understanding the actual purpose of *Chronicle of the Serb Rulers*—Blastimer, the first historically dated Serbian prince and contemporary of Khan Presian. As Komatina rightly points out, the patrimonial division of the land after Blastimer's death amongst his sons Muntimer, Stroïmer, and Goïnikos has direct parallels with the beginning of the story and the division of the Serbs before the migration.²⁸ Thus, it has important symbolic meaning within the narrative structure of chapter 32, as it references the distant past to validate the present. The text also very clearly implied that, initially, all three brothers had an equal right to rule over the Serbs until Muntimer took all the power into his hands.²⁹ This might give us the key to understanding the political purpose of the *Chronicle of the Serb Rulers*—it was composed in the circles close to Prince Časlav to legitimize his rule and newly established alliance with the Byzantines.

Časlav was brought up in Bulgaria as the son of a Bulgarian mother. In the early 920s, he helped (willingly or unwillingly) the Bulgars in facilitating the surrender of the Serb elite after the Bulgars overthrew his cousin Zacharias. So, it seems clear that Časlav might have had a somewhat difficult time establishing himself as a prince, as he must have been seen as a foreigner by the Serbs. When Časlav left Bulgaria, which is dated between 927 and 933/34,³⁰ and allied with the Byzantines to take power in Serbia, his only claim to the throne was ancestry through his father Klonimer—the son of Stroïmer and grandson of Blastimer. However, unlike the sons of Muntimer and Goïnikos, Časlav's father was never a Serb prince, as he lived at the Bulgar court.³¹ So, it is not difficult to imagine that Časlav needed a narrative to restate his claim to the throne through genealogical connections to Blastimer and a (probably legendary) migration leader. Longer excursus on Serb wanderings during the times of Heraclius in the *DAI* can also perhaps be better explained if looked at in the context of the geopolitical changes that occurred during Časlav's reign that turned Serbia from the Bulgars towards the Byzantines. This narrative was, therefore, the 'creative contribution' of the writers of the *DAI*, intended to strengthen ties with a new ally by extending the Serb–Byzantine relationship into the distant past.

28 Komatina, *Konstantin Porfirogenit*, 235–36.

29 *DAI*, 32.42–44, 57–62.

30 See different opinions in Leszka, "On the reliability," 131–32. His opinion that Časlav was enthroned with approval of the Bulgars is interesting but not accepted in general scholarship.

31 *DAI*, 32.62–65, 117–45.

The Serbs in the ninth-century Balkans

The second problem related to the early medieval Serbs discussed here is evidence for the spread of the Serb ethnonym in the western and central Balkans from the ninth century onwards. As noted earlier, the *DAI* explicitly states that the Pagani-Narentani, Zahumljani, Travunjani, and Canaliti, the Slavic ethnonyms used by the Byzantine administration from the ninth and tenth century, are Serbs, descendants of the “unbaptised” Serbs settled during the times of Heraclius, in the same way the “baptised” Serbs were in Raška. In addition, the *DAI* mentions the “small land of Bosona,” typically taken as the core of the future Bosnian medieval polity, as a part of Serbia.³² More than one century before the *DAI*, the Frankish Royal Annals mentioned “the dukes of the Sorabi” in Dalmatia 822, who were giving refuge to Liudewitus (Ljudevit), a rogue Carolingian duke of Lower Pannonia hiding from the Frankish army. From the context, it is clear that the ARF was referring to the territory of the former late antique province of Dalmatia and that these Sorabi should be located in the deep hinterland of the eastern Adriatic, probably modern northern and/or central Bosnia.³³

Some memories of this early medieval widespread ‘Serbness’ in the Dalmatian hinterland are detectable in later centuries. Documents confirming the extent of the power of the archbishop of Dubrovnik, starting from 1022, mention *regnum Servilie* (i.e., Serbia), but in the 1187 bull of Pope Urban III, the phrase *regnum Serviae quid est Bosnia* appears at this place in the listing order, thus linking Bosnia and Serbia.³⁴ It is also similar to the often discussed sentence of John Kinnamos, imperial secretary to Manuel Komnenos (before 1143 – after 1185), who says that the “river Drina separates Bosnia from the rest of Serbia,” implying that Bosnia is part of wider ‘Serb lands,’ but acknowledging that it was a separate political entity from Serbia at that time.³⁵ Further memories of this early medieval ‘Serbness’ in the Dalmatian hinterland could be recalled in local perceptions, witnessed in the thirteenth-century charters of the Bosnian *ban* Matthew (Matej) Ninoslav (r. 1232–1250), which acted as political treaties with the city of Dubrovnik. In three of the four charters issued between 1214–1217 (or more likely 1232–1235, 1240, and 1249), amongst other things, the terms Serb (*Srblin/Serblin* – СЕРБЛИНЪ) and Vlach (*Vlah* – ВЛАХЪ)

32 *DAI*, 32.21–29; 32.149–151; 33.8–10; 34.1–6; 36.5–7. All these ethnonyms, except the Narentani (Zahumljani, Travunjani, Canaliti), are mentioned in the *Book of Ceremonies*, 2.48 (Vol. 3, 374–75).

33 The issue of the dukes of Sorabi in Dalmatia (*ARF* s.a. 822; *AF* s.a. 822) was discussed in several publications (e.g., more recently Živković, “The origin”) which took the term “Sorabi” literally as the Serbs.

34 *CD*, 2.199 (p. 207); 2.211 (p. 226); 3.246 (p. 274); 4.48 (p. 54); *regnum Servilie quid est Bosna* (papal diplomacy).

35 *Cinnami epitome*, 104.7–10.

are mentioned, which would have regulated their legal positions in Bosnia and the Republic of Dubrovnik.³⁶ These appearances of the Serbs and Vlachs in the charters of Bosnian ban have generated voluminous debate that initially involved seeing the terms describing the subjects of *ban* Ninoslav as ethnic Serbs and the citizens of Dubrovnik as the Vlachs.³⁷ A different opinion was argued by Raukar. He thought that the Serb-Vlach terminology did not imply inhabitants of Bosnia and Dubrovnik but was rather developed in the diplomatic chancellery of the Raška Serb court and taken over by the Dubrovnik chancellery, where most of these documents were written with an outsider's perception.³⁸ However, this does not explain the fact that the earliest charter, an appendix to a now lost document, was written by Ninoslav's own scribe, *grammaticus* Desoje, suggesting that the terms *Serblin* and *Vlah* are present in the perception of Ninoslav's own chancellery.³⁹ It seems more appropriate to interpret the term *Serblin* in these charters as an archaism from earlier centuries when this term might have held more significance for the local population and local elites. This 'Serbness' in the local perception of the Bosnian elite will ultimately disappear because the claim on the Serb ethnonym was already much more successfully used by the elite of another polity—the Raška Serbs. This will be clearly visible in the early fourteenth-century documents, when a new group name, "Bosnians" (*Bošnjani*), starts to be claimed by the select elite of the Bosnian *banate*.⁴⁰

Archaeology of the ninth century only reveals a partial similarity of material culture in the 'Serb lands' of the *DAI*. The regions on the left and right banks of the Middle and Lower Neretva in modern Herzegovina, attributed to the groups called Narentani and Zahumljani, are home to 'warrior burials' with Carolingian weapons, horseman equipment, and belt garnitures. This is reminiscent of the areas in the hinterland of Zadar and Split, as well as modern-day southwestern and western Bosnia, which belonged to the Duchy of Dalmatia, later known as the Croat duchy and kingdom. The rest of the eastern Adriatic hinterland, attributed to the Serbs, does not bear any evidence of Carolingian artifacts or 'warrior burials.'⁴¹ Thus, we can see that communities of the Narentani and Zahumljani, although labeled "the Serbs" by the

36 *Stare srpske povelje* no. 9, 11–12 (pp. 6–10) (= *CD*, 3.371 p. 427; 4.99 pp. 107–108; 4.341 pp. 386–387).

37 E.g. Jireček, "Die Wlachen," 111–12; Rački, "Hrvatska prije XII vieka," 141; Ćorović, *Historija Bosne*, 204–5; Ćirković, *Istorija*, 338; Mrgić Radojčić, *Donji Kraji*, 134, note 3.

38 Raukar, *Hrvatsko srednjovjekovlje*, 283–85.

39 *Stare srpske povelje* 9 (p. 6) (= *CD*, 3.371 p. 427).

40 On *Bošnjani* as elite identity see Raukar, *Hrvatsko srednjovjekovlje*, 285–86 and more comprehensively in Džaja, "Dobri Bošnjani."

41 See the spread of Carolingian artifacts in the eastern Adriatic hinterland (up to the publication date) in the catalog Milošević, ed., *Hrvati i Karolinzi*, Vol. 2, 174–75, cf. Džino, *From Justinian*, 156–65, 181–86; Džino, *Early Medieval Hum and Bosnia*, 135–56.

DAI, have a different experience in terms of their interaction with the Carolingian empire in the ninth century and that they belonged to different social networks from communities living in the eastern Adriatic hinterland, including the “baptized Serbs” in Ras. Therefore, the archaeology cannot provide evidence for a coherent and different material culture in all these areas labeled by the *DAI* as the “Serb lands.” In addition, the *DAI* also contradicts itself by saying that the ruling elite kindred of the Zahumljani are not the Serbs but rather originate from the Litziki on the river Visla.⁴²

The manuscript of *Historia Salonitana Maior (HSM)*, before listing the decisions of the Church Council in Split from 925, says that the bishops coming to the council from all parts of coastal Dalmatia passed through the states of the Croats and “*Vrborum*,” meeting their nobles along the way. This was recently used by Komatina as evidence that the (Za)humljani (whose duke was present at the Council), a place where the bishops from Kotor and Dubrovnik must have passed through on their way to Split, were the Serbs, by following some earlier authors in reading the word *Vrborum* as *Serborum*, i.e., the Serbs. However, such an assumption is highly problematic. The *HSM* is a later and longer text from the sixteenth century, based on the thirteenth-century *Historia Salonitana (HS)* by Thomas the Archdeacon of Split. The sections on the Split councils in 925 and 928, preserved in the *HSM*, are missing from *HS* and seem to have been composed by multiple authors. The passage on the gathering of the bishops was written by a later author, so cannot be used as authentic evidence from the tenth century in the same way that the papal letters or actual acts of the councils can.⁴³

As stated earlier, the idea that the Serbs migrated to the Balkans in the seventh century is based on the testimony of the *DAI*, which does not withstand textual criticism and cannot be supported with archaeological evidence. However, it is impossible to deny the presence of the Serb ethnonym in the early medieval Balkans, stretching much wider than the state of the Serbs from Ras. It is very unlikely that different Slavic elite groups from the ninth century, distributed over the vast areas of western and central Balkans, could have shared the same sense of ethnicity. As shown in the example of the groups inhabiting and contesting power within the ninth-century Dalmatian (later Croat) duchy in the eastern Adriatic, ethnicity was linked to small gentile elite groups, some of which were of migrant origin. Migration processes are detectable there from the late eighth and throughout the ninth century as a longer-term process based on local, gradual, long-distance, and also return migrations of small Slav-speaking groups. Some of these ethnonyms, such as the Croats, survived and were accepted by other elite groups and the wider population as a shared sense of identity, while the others were not so successful. The evidence

42 *DAI*, 33.16–19.

43 *HSM*, 628r (pp. 98–99); Komatina, *Konstantin Porfirogenit*, 277. See Budak’s “*Historia Salonitana*” on the origins of the text and composition of the section of the Split Councils.

from the central Balkans points to very similar conclusions about successive population inflows from neighboring areas in the eighth and ninth centuries.⁴⁴ Thus, the assumption that a large population of the ethnic Serbs at some point in time migrated and settled in the western and central Balkans is untenable and should be explained differently.

It is possible that the elites of some of these Slavic groups originated from the Polabian Sorabi or claimed origins from them. The Sorabi was an ethnonym applied by the sources to a political union of different Slavic communities in the middle flow of the river Elbe/Labe, one of the most significant western Slavic political groups together with the Wiltzi and Abodrites. For that reason, the Frankish annalist, who had more experience with the Polabian Sorabi, recognised their offshoots in the deep Dalmatian hinterland. However, the Byzantine perception was not based on the same premises. Chapters 29, 30, and 31 of the *DAI* mention the Narentani-Pagani, Zahumljani, Travunjani, and Canaliti but never state that they are the Serbs. This connection comes first, as mentioned above, in chapter 32, where these groups are connected with the imaginary seventh-century settlement of the Serbs and the same premise is repeated in chapters 33 (Zahumljani), 34 (Travunjani and Canaliti), 36 (Narentani-Pagani), when each of these groups is described as having descended from the “unbaptized Serbs,” settled in the time of Heraclius.⁴⁵ Knowing that the seventh-century migration story of the Serbs is highly problematic to prove, it seems that the perception of these groups as the “Serbs” from the *DAI* might also be part of a literary construct that stretches their submission to the Empire into a distant past. An indication of such a conclusion being valid is the aforementioned information about the non-Serb origins of the ruling kindred of the Zahumljani. To be sure, the elites of the Travunjani and Canaliti might have been more closely connected with the Serbs, as the *DAI* mentions a marriage between the daughter of Serb prince Blastimer and Kraïnas, *župan* (lord) of the Travunjani, as well as the information that the Travunjani were “always” under Serb rule and that the Canaliti are subordinated to the Travunjani.⁴⁶ However, the Serb origins of the Pagani-Narentani and Zahumljani remain a problematic issue, which is solely based only on the pseudo-historical story of the Serb migration in the seventh century.

There is also another possibility, which is that multiple groups in Central and Eastern Europe claimed origins from the group placed in the context of Samo’s rebellion in the early 630s, whom Fredegar knew as the Surbi. Fredegar perceives the Surbi as a Slavic people who overthrew the Frankish overlordship and joined

44 Džino, *From Justinian*, 161–65, 173–76, 186–88 (east Adriatic with hinterland); Bugarski and Radišić, “The Central Balkans,” 99 (modern Serbia).

45 *DAI*, 32.21–29; 33.8–10; 34.1–6; 36.5–7.

46 *DAI*, 34.6–16.

Samo, led by their Duke Dervanus. The location of these, Surbi, is never mentioned but usually assumed to be the same as Polabian Sorabi mentioned from the late eighth century in the Frankish sources dwelling on the Thuringian borders.⁴⁷ While linguistic etymology is not always useful for history and archaeology, it is worth mentioning the opinion of some linguists that this ethnonym comes from Old Slavic **srbbъ*, which might have had the meaning of ‘descendant’/‘successor,’ ‘people,’ or could have meant ‘kinsmen.’⁴⁸ The later medieval Czech *Chronicle of Dalimil* from the fourteenth century uses the ethnonym “Serbs” in a few places to mean Slavs.⁴⁹ This could also be interpreted as a much later reflection of the wider significance of this ethnonym. These possibilities (at least on hypothetical grounds) support the idea that the ethnonyms Sorabi/Surbi/Serbs claimed by different Slavic groups were, in fact, prestigious names rather than referred to a stable and persistent ethnic identity. The evidence in the so-called Bavarian Geographer manuscript from the ninth century confirms the existence of other prestigious names amongst the Slavs, such as Zeriواني/Zuierani, who were apparently regarded as ‘progenitors of the Slavs.’⁵⁰ Such claims to certain ethnonyms were common in the early medieval past—a good example is seen with the European Avars, who monopolized this prestige ethnonym from Chinese frontiers.⁵¹ Thus, it seems that different elite Slavic groups claimed the ‘Serb’ name as a prestigious name in order to explain their origins or justify their newly taken positions of local leadership *rather* than because of their being part of a unified Serb ethnicity. This especially relates to the groups from the hinterland in modern central, eastern, and northern Bosnia. As history shows, only two of those groups successfully monopolized the Serb name in the end: the Serbs from Ras and Lusatian Sorbs.

Conclusion

A few conclusions follow from the present discussion. First, with the present state of the evidence, it is not possible to support the idea of a seventh-century migration of the Serbs to the Balkans. This segment of chapter 32 of the *DAI* seems to have been produced in the context of the mid-tenth century in order to provide pseudo-historical support for a newly established Serb–Byzantine alliance. It was incorporated in the narrative about the Serb princes from the ninth century, which was most likely

47 Fredegar, 4.68 (p. 155).

48 Gołąb, “About the connection”; Hermann, “Die Slawen,” 12; Loma, “Serbisches und kroatisches,” 93; Komatina, “Slavyanskiye etnonimy,” 114; Komatina, *Konstantin Porfirogenit*, 218.

49 *Staročeska kronika*, 98.29–31, 105.1–4; Gavrilović, “O Srbima”; cf. Mesiarkin, “Examining,” 94.

50 Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. Clm. 560. fol. 150r – the Zeriواني as the Slav ‘progenitors’.

51 Pohl, *Avars*, 33–47.

composed at the court of Prince Časlav in the 940s in order to reinforce his right to rule over the Serbs as a direct descendant of Blastimer and a legendary unnamed Serb prince who led the Serb migration. It is possible that the “baptized” Serbs, or at least their elite kindred, were migrants who arrived at some point in time in the eighth or early ninth-century central Balkans, but such a premise needs much more archaeological evidence to be established as a historical fact.

Second, the undeniable presence of the Serb ethnonym in the Adriatic hinterland from the ninth century was not a consequence of mass migration by an ethnically homogenous group. The migrations likely affected these areas south of the Sava and Danube from the late seventh century onwards but as a long-ongoing process carried out by small groups of individuals with heterogeneous origins rather than the long-distance migration and settlement of large groups. The spread of the Serb ethnonym should be therefore interpreted either as a perception of cultural similarities and shared origins amongst these Slav-speaking political groups by outside observers or as a justified or invented claim to a prestige ethnic name by these newly migrated Slavic-speaking elite groups in the eastern Adriatic area. It was used to justify the power of these groups and their followers on a local level and provide them with a ‘historical biography’ by relating them to an important Slavic political alliance in East Central Europe.

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