OVERLAND BALKAN ROUTES IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Summary, with a special focus on cultural-political implications.

Summarising a subject such as overland Balkan routes in the middle ages in only fifteen minutes is an arduous task. This topic has been the focus of very little literature and would certainly merit a more in-depth discussion on all the points raised. Some of these points may appear controversial at the very least, such as for example the concept itself of the continuity of these roads over time.

After having meditated on it for a long time, I became even more convinced of this, following the international meeting held two months ago at Le Puy-en-Velay to celebrate the Council of Europe’s recognition of the first European cultural itinerary 20 years ago - the route to Santiago di Compostela. The meeting was an opportunity which fuelled further reflection on how Council of Europe cultural itineraries are set to evolve in the future. I therefore decided to limit myself to a few references to the scientific part of my presentation. This will nevertheless be handed to the Congress Secretariat to be included in its Documentation in full and is already available in Italian on the Centro Studi Romei website (www.centrostudiromei.eu).

In fact, I believe it is my duty to participants from Greece, the Balkans and Western Europe in general to express a need which is highly felt by the Centro Studi Romei and shared by many cultural operators from around Europe.

The time has come to bridge a gap. Up until today, politics, languages and reciprocal diffidence have stopped countries from the Balkan Peninsula from constructing their own logic and aspirations in terms of exchanges; something which is common in the western part of the Continent.

Today, the wisest, most culturally prepared and intellectually open parties - that is historians and scholars in general - can contribute to filling this void.

The idea is that overland Balkan routes to Constantinople, and thence to Jerusalem, should become a new and important European cultural-historical itinerary. I am not just thinking of the via Egnatia or the via Diagonalis, but of both of these roads together, including all the many side roads which were created to provide intra-local connections at different times and for different reasons. The reason behind this coupling is that both roads share the same destination – Constantinople - and through it a passage towards Asia Minor and to the Holy Land.

Those who are familiar with the myriad of itineraries which take the traveller to Santiago de Compostela know that these are part of a network of roads from alternative directions which join up in the final part of the journey. The same must be true for Constantinople itineraries in order to add value to them. Any other logic, apart from contradicting the reason why these roads and their branches were created and developed, would also be limited and counterproductive.

What do the via Egnatia and the Via Diagonalis have that is so important when taken together? First of all, they are cultural symbol of great magnitude. The logic behind my presentation is summarised here in an extremely succinct form.

During those times when the Balkans were undivided by ethnic and ideological cleavages, these roads represented the nerve centres of this unity, this ecumene.

The anonymous pilgrim who described in 333 AD the Itinerarium Burdigalense found organised roads in the Balkans, complete with places where he could rest, refresh himself and change mounts. As such, he preferred it to more famous alternatives, such as the route which passed through Rome and the ports of Puglia.

Cyril-Constantine and Methodius’s mission to Moravia in 863 AD set out from Thessalonica because "the inhabitants of this city could not but know the Slavic language well", as the Emperor Michael himself told Cyril. Their mission later took them all over the Balkans and to the Italian peninsula when they were summoned to Rome by the Pope. None of the protagonists met with any difficulties during their travels, although they did face a series of religious problems as well as problems connected to diocesan administrative competences.

This is the second time that the Centro Studi Romei of Florence discusses overland Balkan routes in the Middle Ages. The first time was back in 2006 when, as a result of a strange set of circumstances, Renato Stopani (The Chairman of the Centro Studi) and I (Scientific Secretary) found ourselves - albeit in the company of Bulgarian friends - having to organise and manage a conference in Sophia in Bulgaria without speaking a single word of Bulgarian. We had excellent simultaneous interpreters and a focused and interested public. The texts were published at the Centro Studi Romei, «De strata francigena. Studi e ricerche sulle vie di pellegrinaggio del medioevo» journal of the Year XIV (2006/1), as well as in a special, abridged, edition handed out to participants at the Sophia conference complete with a Bulgarian translation. To further underline the importance of rediscovering these roads, the texts have been published in their entirety on the Centro Studi Romei website http:\www.centrostudiromei.eu.
When Georg Ostrogorsky summarised relevant events which took place during the sixth decade of the 9th century, he focused on those which had not just local repercussions, but had effects which continue to be felt today. When reading his paper one cannot but congratulate him on his ability to be succinct. However, he also forces the reader to deduce that everything becomes possible, easy and acceptable the moment when a foreigner is no longer considered the enemy - and this was one of those moments - including the use of a new language as a vehicle to spread religion in the ecumene.

With Hungary's conversion to Christianity at the end of the 10th century, an increasing number of even high ranking pilgrims from the west, such as German and French bishops, began employing these roads to travel to Jerusalem, starting from the first few years of the 11th century. A number of scholars have stressed the affordable nature of overland routes as opposed to maritime routes. I do not believe that this factor would have been a real problem for bishops from rich provinces in the West. Theirs was cultural, diplomatic and human choice. Overland routes allowed them to develop potentially durable human relations while maritime travel did not - or at least not in such an immediate manner.

I have willingly ignored the highly important crusade aspect in terms of the use of both Balkan roads even if the role played by armed pilgrims is adequately discussed in the scientific text. I also intend to willingly ignore the use of the via Egnatia by Normans to undermine the stability of the Byzantine Empire.

I would instead like to stress that overland Balkan routes have been a vehicle of primary importance for cultural exchanges. Now scholars of a certain level have proven the continuity, as well as the contiguity, of heretic dualistic beliefs amongst the Bogomils in the Balkans, the Patarines in Italy and the Catharists in southern France, then it follows that we must assume that these exchanges have taken place by means of overland routes. A Bogomil missionary would have found it very difficult to escape attention within the confines of a ship, since both his ascetic behaviour and his religious rituals would have been easily recognised and denounced.

This is proof that, in general, we do not easily give up on the use of a road as a means of communication. Although there may have been times when local potentates or Arab marauders may have abducted an ambassador or captured the inhabitants of a city and sold them into slavery, in the long run these episodes can be written off as occasional incidents. The roads continued to be used, just as Bertradon de la Broquière did in 1433 and the Hungarian bishop Veratius did in 1553.

What must also be noted is that the Byzantine Empire - throughout its extended duration - almost always made an attempt to settle disputes. Pride did not stop the Basileus from paying tribute to the Bulgarians, if it meant ensuring supplies for the capital, which needed Thrace's agricultural and animal products, amongst other things.

However, I believe that if we dig deeper, we will inevitably discover that the merit of this search for collectivism and interdependence and for a non-belligerent proximity must be extended both vertically to include the city's authorities and spatially to include almost all the areas in which the major Balkan roads developed.

Ambassadors took on the roll of scouts. Their high rank, and therefore the respect the Byzantine Empire accorded to Bulgarian and Serbian ambassadors - and even more so to those from the Western Empire - is renowned.

The ambassadors, and their missions were soon followed by merchants, who used roads when maritime transport was not possible, both because they were less risky and because they were cheaper. The merchants were in turn followed by pilgrims.

At this point, mention must be made of the armed pilgrimages of the first, second and third Crusades. Sources describe at times even harsh conflicts during these long overland journeys. These clashes were primarily the result of mental reserves on both parts; but they are irrelevant, if we think of the number of people involved and the novelty of travel for such large masses of people. In historical terms, a reckoning of the balance of Balkan crossings during the first Crusades cannot but be predominately positive. Passages through territories which - if not hostile - were at least worrisome, took place without significant incidents. In some parts of Bulgaria, the memory of the crusaders is still tinged with romanticism. There are some who believe that the blond-haired inhabitants of a number of isolated valleys are the descendants of German crusaders. Who knows, genetics might yet prove them right.

Penetrating and conquering the Balkans has always been said to be easier from the continent as opposed to the sea. However, we cannot blame the roads for certain ethnic and political divisions which have facilitated wave upon wave of invasions in the region. Today, after more than one thousand years, the feast of Cyril and Methodius is celebrated in at least seven different countries. However, none of the politicians who give speeches in remembrance of the two evangelists of the Slavs ever mentions that both worked to unite all those people under a single sovereign.

It is easier to remember - as the young translator who accompanied our "mission" said to us after the Sophia Convention last year - that enemies and invaders travel by road, as young children are still taught in schools in Serbia, Croatia, Macedon, Kosovo, Albania and perhaps even Greece.

We must combat this erroneous logic today. The roads are not at fault. They have always carried out their function with an overwhelming indifference to the destiny of mankind. Blaming them is both blind and in bad faith.

In the scientific report included in the Documentation, I tried to reconstruct the attempts made by Balkan roads over the centuries to work, in spite of the fact that men - or a significant number of these - did all they could to limit them or stop them from functioning.
I once visited a bridge in the Rodhopes in Bulgaria. It was lost amongst the mountains and almost isolated. It also had no access roads and was as beautiful as the defunct bridge of Mostar. The bridge had clearly been built in the late medieval period, and therefore had Turkish origins. I was told it was Roman. Why do we still persist in thinking that our enemies could not possibly have done anything good or useful? The Mostar bridge had no strategic significance, but perhaps it suffered from the same defect of origin.

If we want to stop acts of barbarity from being committed, we must work to ensure that these beliefs are replaced by other objectives.

My friend Thomas Szabó, who spoke before me here, knows that his work - as well as the years spent on researching historical Italian roads - together with the work carried out by Renato Stopani and others, is important not just to the progress of history as a discipline, but to also rehabilitate the via Francigena as a cultural itinerary in Europe.

I know that the work which needs to be carried out on the Balkan roads is more complicated both from a scientific point of view and in terms of their cultural and functional recovery. However, I have no intention of giving up.

You will therefore forgive me if, instead of an incomplete summary of my scientific work - which, I repeat, you will find difficult to decipher for those who do not have a copy at hand and for those who are not expert palaeographers.

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1. Constantinople and the Balkans. A second Rome, without a second Lazio.2

In the 4th century, the Empire's primary duty was defending the integrity of the ecumene. The choice of location for a new capital for the Emperor Constantine was undoubtedly based on easy access to the sea. However, overland connections were also taken seriously into consideration. Of these, the via Egnatia3 was the umbilical cord connecting Durrës (Dyrrachium) and Thessalonica - the two most important ports of the Eastern Roman Empire - to the capital. The second road, the so-called via Militaris or better, the via Diagonalis,4 (both names are modern, but the second is more indicative as well as more practical) was instead a strategic road leading to the strongholds in the North along the Danube and the Balkan mountains. They were the Empire's first line of defence. Its second line of defence was on the Rodhopes, while the Long Walls were the Empire's third and last line of defence. These were the lengthy defence walls which separated the suburbs of

2 Business and cultural exchanges between Byzantium and the West are the subjects of a vast literature. Special mention must be made here of the XI Settimana di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo (18-23 April 1963), and in particular the lectures given by Agostino Pertusi ("Bisanzio e l'irradiazione della sua civiltà in Occidente nell'alto medioevo"), and Ivan Đučev ("Bisanzio ed il mondo slavo") as well as the discussion which followed each of the lectures and which is contained in the same volume of the Papers.

3 An announcement on a volume on the Via Egnatia printed by an important Italian publishing house appeared on the Internet. When I made a request through a trusted librarian, he was told that the volume had not been printed due to a lack of demand on the market. This means that the work exists and that it is ready, but that there are very few people interested in it. This is why the authoritative study on these roads remains "Itineraria romana" / K. Miller. – Stuttgart, 1916, which is also useful when studying other Balkan routes.


A transcription of the mansiones et mutationes of the Tabula Peutingeriana, from 'Itinerarium Antonini Augusti', and 'Itinerarium Hierosolymitanum' as well as two other post-medieval sources can be found in the appendix.

Please find the stops of the Peutinger Table (in parenthesis the stops of the Ravenna Cosmography – Ravennatis anonymi cosmographia et Guidonis geographia. Edd. M. Pinder et G. Parthey. – Berolini 1860, pg. 183, 191) which are more difficult to decipher for those who do not have a copy at hand and for those who are not expert palaeographers.

Singiduno XIIII / Tricornio XII / Monte aureo XIII / Margum fl. X / Viminatio XVIII / Municipio X / Iovis pago XII (Pago) / Idimo XVI / Horrea Margi XVII (Orea Margi) / Presidio Dasmini XV (Dasmiani) / Presidio Pompei XII (Povpeg is) / Grammiriani XIII (Crambiani) / Naissus XXIII (Naisos) / Romanea XXV (Romessiana) / Turribus XXIX (Turribus) / Meldius XXVIII (Meldis) / Sertica XX / Sarto XVIII (Sparthon) / Egerica XIII (Egerica) / Zymris XXIII (Zirmis) / Philopolis XXVII / Ranilum XXV (Ranilum) / Piso XII / Arzum XVIII / Castris Rubris XVI / Burdenis XX / Hadrianopoli XVIII / Hostizo XVIII / Burtizo XVIII (Burtzoni) / Bergule XII (Bergule) / Drysiporo XII (Drujipara) / Syrallo X (Surallo) / Perintus XVI / Ad statuas XVIII (Statuas) / Melintiana XXIII (Melantiada) / Regio XII / Constantinopolis.

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Constantinople from the rest of Europe. Its system of defence was simple and practical to the south as well: the Sea of Marmara acted as a natural barrier against the enemy as well as an ally to the feet at Thessalonica - which was able to make relatively speedy interventions.

However, Constantine's decision was all but a given. After all, before his choice for a new capital fell on Byzantium, Naissus (Nisch), where Constantine - the descendent of a powerful family from Mesia - was born, was taken into consideration, as was Sardica (Sophia). Both are located on the Via Diagonalis. He also thought of Thessalonica as a capital. His choice therefore was neither obvious nor a given. Tax, commercial exemptions and the foederati workforce did the rest.5

Even before that, Galerius was granted a large slice of the Balkan Peninsula during the Tetrarchy under Diocletian. The administrative capital of his imperium was Sirmium (near Mitrovitz today), which was also on the Via Diagonalis. This is a strong point underlining the fact that the entire Balkan Peninsula began to play a pivotal and strategic role once the Empire started to undergo its military-defensive transformation.

The first line of defence described earlier, had Philippopolis (now Plovdiv in Bulgaria) as its focal point, while Adrianople (now Edirne in Turkey) was the key to the second line of defence. Both are located along the via Diagonalis and the latter is fount at the point where this road meets a side road from the Via Egnatia. The violent and tragic Battle of Adrianople (9 August 378) was fought on the spot where these two important military roads met and is a clear sign of the strategic importance of this place. The safety of the Empire in that particular case depended on the walls of the city and on the Goths' inability to handle a siege.6

The dire situation seen at the edges of the Empire after the Slavic invasion of Greece in the 7th century is proof of the importance of Thessalonica and of its links to the capital, including its overland connections. It also shows us that Thessalonica was capable of rebuilding inter-ethnic and diplomatic relations by means of its overland connections with Sophia, Ohrid, Skopje and Belgrade as well as with its links to the south ( Methoni, Larissa, Thebes, Athens and the Peloponnesian).

As such, starting from the 4th century we have a second Rome, without however being able to say that we have a "second Lazio". This is because the political conditions of the Balkan Peninsula and its security were much more precarious than those the builders of the new Rome expected.

Therefore, these connections and the inter-ethnic relations with Thessalonica at it centre must have appeared relatively soon, with obvious repercussions on the Balkan road network.7

2. The Peutinger Table. Differences between dreams and reality.

Even modern cartographic representations of the traditional road network in the Balkan are few and often imprecise. The reason for this might be that the Balkan chessboard does not boast first rate cities (such as Rome, Constantinople and Antioch). However, two second level cities - Aquileia and Thessalonica - are located at either of its ends.9

Classical literature is not much help in this respect. Unfortunately, Pliny the Elder does not describe roads, if not in a circumstantial manner. What is obvious is that when he notes the distance in miles between two cities, he alludes to the fact that these were connected by an important, and almost always consular, road. This is true for Dyrrachium (Durrës) for example, which Pliny describes as being 711 miles from Byzantium.8 Martianus Capella contributes almost nothing to this meagre information.10

What has been proven is that the Via Diagonalis from Carnuntum on the Austrian Danube was connected directly to the amber road which led to Aquileia, passing through Scarbantia (Sopron), Savaria (Szombathely), Poetovio (Ptuj), Celia (Celje) and Emona (Ljubljana).11 Sirmium, which was chosen by Galerius as his capital, was the archdiocese of the church and therefore played a significant administrative role as well. Furthermore, up until 379 - date of a decree by Gratian - civil administrations in Dacia and Macedonia were part of the Western Empire and were only effectively separated from the West during the partition between Valentinian II and Theodosius, son of the same Gratian. The result was that the archbishop of Thessalonica and Belgrade (sicl. chapter 42).

7 What is curious, and perhaps even significant, is that in one of its very few references to travel the De administrando imperio by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, traces the distance (eight days of travelling not under a forced march) between Thessalonica and Belgrade (sicl. chapter 42).
8 Other relevant cities are Ravenna, Nicomedia and Nicaea.
9 «Naturalis Historiae Libri» / Plineus Secundus. – Liber IV, 46.
10 «De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii» / Martianus Capella. – Liber VI, 657.
Thessalonica was granted vast powers by the Papacy in Rome on all issues to be settled in Illyria. In any case, anyone who has ever touched upon relations between the Church in Rome and the Balkan is aware of the interest that the Sedes Petri had in the area - to the extent of justifying its "linguistic" opening towards Cyril and Methodius. We will be discussing this topic again further on.

On the other hand, the Peutinger Table – a document dating originally back to the Late Classical Period which was copied in the 12th century - is extremely rich in information on Balkan roads. The Tabula's almost two-dimensional flattening gives it the advantage of mentioning and representing each statio regardless of the actual length of the road and stretches out the Balkan table, which ends up occupying more than half of the map from Tergeste (Trieste) to Constantinople. The road which runs parallel the right bank of the Danube from Singidunum (Belgrade) to the delta of the river is now known as the "road of the roman legions" because eight legions had been posted along it, at least until the Danube limes has remained in the same place. The quasi-costal road between Aquileia and Dyrrachium is also marked on the Tabula, but this does not mean that it could be travelled during the Middle Ages. The story of the contingent of crusaders headed by the Count of Toulouse leads us to suspect that no trace of it remained at the time, or that the crusaders where kept well away from it by treacherous local guides. However the Arab geographer and traveller Al-Idrisi - who dedicated his geographical book to the King of Sicily - describes the stops made by his Third Compartment along the coastal road between Aquileia and Durres.

13 In the De rebus gestis Ottonis Imperatoris, Liutprand, the bishop of Cremona recalls the presence of Papal entourage in two passages “Saleccum, natione Bulgarium, educatione Ungarium, domni papae familiarissimum, et Zacheum virum reprobatum, divinarum atque humanarum insciun litterarum, a domno papa episcopum noviter consecratum, et Ungarii ad praedicandum, ut super nos irruant, destinatum…” giving us a glimpse of the tight bonds forged by the Roman Curia with the Balkan region in the X century. Furthermore, in the De administro de imperio (Dumbarton Oaks, 1967) Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus himself expresses an awareness not just of the interest of the Roman church but of its territorial competencies in Dalmatia and Croatia on more than one occasion (scil. chapters 30 and 31).
15 “Historia rerum gestarum in partibus transmarinis” / Guillelmus Tyrensis (Patrologia Latina = henceforth PL 201) “CAPUT XVII. Comes Tolosanus, et episcopus Podiensis cum suis agminibus per Dalmatiam properant, multam difficultatem itineris in ea regione perpersi. (...) Hi omnes, praedictos venerabiles viros cum omni reverentia secuti, in Italian descenderunt, transursaque Lombardia, per eam regionem qua forum Iulii appellatur, juxta Aquileiam transeuntes in Istriam, inde tandem in Dalmatiam descenderunt. Est autem Dalmatia longe patens regio inter Hungariam et Adriaticum mare sita, quatuor habens metropoles, Iazaram et Saloman, quaie alio nomine dicitur Spletalum, Antibarium et Ragusam, populo ferocissimo, rapinis et caedibus assueto inhabitata: montibus et silvis, magnis quoque fluminibus, pascuis etiam longe lateque diffusus occupata penitus, ita ut raram habeat agrorum culturam, locorum incolis in gregibus et armentis raram habeat agrorum culturam, locorum incolis in gregibus et armentis Luidini habent idiomad; reliquis Scavonomico serie mutationibus et habitu barbarorum. Hanc igitur ingressi provinciam, multam invenerunt itineris difficultatem, maxime propter hiemis instantiam et locorum nimiam inaequalitatem; sed et victus et alimentorum sustinentes gravem defectum, periculose satis per dies aliquot laboraverunt inedia.”
17 Ibidem, p. 99 and successive: “Questa [Laurana], ultima città della circoscrizione di Aquileia, è grande, popolata e in continua attività di costruzioni navali. Riprendiamo il discorso da questo punto per descrivere le città sistemate sulla costa orientale del Golfo. Diciamo dunque che dalla città di Laurana a quella di Buccari vi sono dieci miglia. Buccari, che si adagia sul mare ed è una città bella e popolata, è il primo centro urbano del territorio croato cui si dà il nome di Dalmazia. Da Buccari sedici miglia per Bribir, località ragguardevole per estensione e popolazione, posta sulle falde di un monte. Da Bribir trenta miglia per Segna, città bella, opulenta e prospera; i suoi abitanti, di razza slava, hanno un considerevole numero di navi. Da Segna a Q旨stisqah (?), cittadina con popolazione slava dotata di poche imbarcazioni, quindici miglia. Da qui a Castel Muschio (?), che appartiene ai Dalmati, corrono venti miglia. Da quest’ultima città corrono quindici miglia per Arbe (?), località di media grandezza che appartiene ai Dalmati e possiede un consistente numero di imbarcazioni. Da qui alla città di Zatton (?) trenta miglia; anche questa appartenne ai Dalmati ed è provveduta di legni da guerra. Da Zatton alla città di Nona – che altri chiamano Nin – corrono venti miglia. Nona è città grande, bella e considerevole e situata altresì in luogo atto alla difesa. Da Nona a Zara… Si tratta di una città con popolazione dalmata, territorio di notevole estensione e fornita di una serie ininterrotta di colture e vigneti. Zara è situata in luogo ameno in riva al mare le cui onde si infrangono sugli scogli. Da Zara a Trenta miglia per Biograd [Zara Vecchia], da annoverare fra le città capitali dei Rum; essa è popolata di Dalmati e di Slavi, tutta gente valorosa. Sa Zara a Sebenico venti miglia. Sebenico, bella e grande città ricca di terre coltivabili, è meta ambita dei mercanti che ad essa accorrono per terra e per mare. Sebenico dista cinquant’anni da...
The Via Egnatia is well marked out in terms of the symbols which represent stationes. It has no primacy compared to other roads which - given the way in which the paper is stretched lengthwise - appear to run almost parallel to it. This tells us that all roads were equally important and equally cared for during the Roman period. According to the Table, the via Egnatia connected back to the via Diagonalis at a common end point and had no direct links with Constantinople. In fact Perinto on the Sea of Marmara is considered the end point of both roads before the Costantinian choice, as the historian Procopius narrates in a famous passage.\[18\]

It is hard to imagine the Tabula Peutingeriana as a "golden age" for Balkan roads. That is, it is difficult to imagine such a rich, homogenous and capillary network of roads. Yet, at the end of the 18th century, Jireček noted that unexpected clues of such a vast richness and diffusion remained a century and a half before.\[19\] Historians, and even more so Balkan archaeologists, are invited to make an effort to have the dream (the Tabula) mirror the reality (the remains of these Roman roads).


The anonymous pilgrim of Burdigala (Bordeaux) who began his voyage to the Holy Land in 333 by passing through Toulouse, Arles, Moncenisio, Turin and later Aquileia, did not take a ship from one of the Adriatic ports - as we would have expected - nor did he travel down the Italian peninsula to go to Rome - which at the time could already have been seen as a place of religious interest - but chose instead to travel by road across the Balkans, leaving us a detailed description of his stops on the Via Diagonalis along with the relative distances he travelled. The only personal note in his account is found after the civitas Vimincacio and marks the place in which Dioecletian killed Carinus. The description of the regions and the summary of the distances which interrupt a dull list of the mansiones and the mutationes show us that Aquileia, Sirmium and Sardica are considered to be important cities and that Constantinople had to be one of the destinations of the trip, because it merited a summary distances and stops, starting from Burdigala itself.\[20\]


Procopius, Aed. IV, 9, 14.


20 This is a transcription of the part which describes the Balkan peninsula crossing:

“\[1\] Fines italicet norci. / Mutatio ad medias milia xiii / civitas celeia milia xiii / mutatio lotodos milia xii / mansio ragindone milia xii / mutatio pultouia milia xii / civitas poctouione milia xii. / Transis pontem, intras pannoniam inferiorem. / Mutatio ramista milia viii / mansio aqua viua milia viii / mutatio populis milia x / civitas iouia milia viii / mutatio sunista milia viii / mutatio peritur milia xii / mansio lentolis milia xii / civitas cardon milia x / mutatio coconis milia xii / mansio serota milia x / mutatio bolentia milia x / mansio maurianis milia viii. / Intras pannoniam superiorem. / Mutatio serena milia viii / mansio vereis milia x / mansio vereis milia x / mutatio ioualia milia viii / mutatio sauova milia vii / mansio mursa milia x / mutatio leutuoano milia xii / civitas cibalis milia xii / mutatio caelena milia xi / mansio vnome milia x / mutatio spaneta milia x / mutatio vedulia milia viii / civitas sirmium milia viii. / Fit ab aquileia, sirmium usque milia cccxii, mansiones xvi, mutationes xxxviii. / Mutatio fossis milia viii / civitas bassianis milia x / mutatio nouiciani milia xii / mutatio altina milia x / civitas singiduno milia viii. / Fines pannoniae et misiae. / Mutatio ad sextum milia vi / mutatio tricorna castra milia vi / mutatio ad sextum milia rem milia vii / civitas aureo monte milia vi / mutatio vnome vii / civitas margo milia viii / civitas vominacio milia x. / Ubi dioecelianus occidit carinus. / Mutatio ad numon milia viii / mansio muncipicio milia viii / mutatio iouis pago milia x / mutatio bao milia vii / mansio idomo milia viii / mutatio ad octauum milia viii / mansio oromago milia viii. / Fines myssiae et asiae. / Mutatio saratorium milia xii / mutatio caminitas milia x / mansio ipompeis milia viii / mutatio rampiana milia xii / civitas naissou milia xii / mutatio redicibus milia xii /
“You are from Thessalonica. All people from there speak slavic language fluently”. The Basileus Michael dismissed Constantine-Cyril, the philosopher, and his brother the Abbot Methodius with these words as they commenced their mission amongst the Slavs of Moravia.\(^{21}\) Constantine-Cyril (†869, in Rome) and his brother Methodius did not actually travel down the via Diagonalis in 863. Instead, they took the road which goes from Thessalonica to Skopje - Nyssa - Sirmio and up to Belgrade. They then journeyed up the Danube before travelling first to Venice and then to Rome - where they had been summoned by the Pope Nicolas I.

The brothers' first mission amongst the Slavs took place during a period of great political turmoil as the Empire opened up for the first time to a world which had previously been regarded with diffidence, if not outright hostility. Ostrogorsky provides an excellent description of this climate.\(^{22}\) This cannot but give us the idea that anyone who lived along the great roads in the Balkans was **mentally open to exchanges** and only needed the bare minimum in terms of vital guarantees before opening up to others.

The monk Blaise of Amorion (†911-912) instead travelled down the via Diagonalis on his way to Rome. On his return journey however, he took a boat from Pozzuoli and stopped at Methoni in the Peloponnnesian and Demetriad in Thessaly before arriving in Constantinople.\(^{23}\)

In 903 Saint Elias of Enna in Sicily\(^{24}\) travelled by boat from Reggio Calabria to Naupatto in front of Corfu, before continuing his travels by land on the same road which Liutprand of Cremona took in 968-969 on his journey back from his ambassadorship to Constantinople on the behalf of Otto the Great.

The Greek names carved into the caves dedicated to Saint Michael in the Gargano, on the other hand, tell us very little\(^{25}\) because they could hail from any of the Byzantine territories in Southern Italy. The three *folles* from the mint in Constantinople found in the same caves instead tell us a bit more,\(^{26}\) even if we cannot definitively connect them back to the via Egnatia.

The inscriptions found in the surviving part of the *Codex Aquileiensis* - also known as the Gospel of Cividale – contain the names of Balkan pilgrims from Bulgaria to Moldavia as well as from Serbia to Croatia. They were written by the
pilgrims themselves or by others for them for apotropaic purposes. The Gospel of Mark in the Codex was believed to have been penned by the Saint itself and as such was considered a relic of the first order.27

But, in spite of these clues, we cannot but acknowledge that any traces of overland pilgrimages before the conversion of the Hungarians in the Balkans are virtually inconsistent. On the other hand, what should be surprising - and therefore an inducement for reflection and further research - is the fact that, just a few years after the conversion of the Hungarian Sovereigns, a determined series of pilgrimages began down this recovered - and perhaps never lost - road for Constantinople and the Holy Land.28

One of the first to reopen the overland route to Jerusalem was Count William d’Angoulême in 1026, as the texts by Ademar of Chabanne and the Gesta episcoporum et comitum Engelismensium,29 note, adding that no one had ventured down that road before “quia novella adhuc christianitas per Ungariam et Slavonium erat”.30

In those years the Hospital of Saint Samson in Constantinople was dedicated to caring for pilgrims.

In 1054 the Byzantine Governor of Laodicea forbade Saint Liebert, the Bishop of Cambrai, from continuing on his travels with the pretext that the roads were unsafe. On reaching Cyprus, the bishop discovered that three hundred pilgrims had been expelled from Jerusalem.31

In 1064 four German bishops from Bamberg, Mainz, Raton and Utrecht travelled together to the Holy Land.

In 1086 Pope Victor III asked the Empress to exonerate pilgrims from paying taxes in order for permission to travel across the country.32

We cannot talk of warning signs for the crusades, nor do I believe it is true to state that overland Balkan routes were favoured because they were cheaper than maritime routes.33 Important bishops from cities in Germany and France could not possibly have had economic problems. If anything - considering that their parties would have been large - they would have probably saved on money and food by travelling by sea.

If I may put forward a non-supportable theory: namely, that it was the reopening of overland Balkan routes themselves which convinced large numbers of people that there was a concrete possibility for a "mass armed pilgrimage" to Jerusalem. The more "spontaneous" and popular components of the first crusade travelled overland so that would not have run the risk becoming separated from fellow travellers as well as in order to avoid having to place themselves in the hands of helmsmen and their crews - who may have been dedicated to piracy and the slave trade.

In terms of heresies and in particular the relationship between the dualism practiced by the Bogomils and that practiced by dualist sects in northern Italy and southern France, many believe them to be proof of continuity and of exchanges between the different areas. The most ardent supporters of this theory of links between the Bogomils, the Patarines and the Catharists are such accredited scholars that we cannot but take their deductions into account. In his two works, The Bogomils34 and Le
Christianisme oriental et les doctrines dualistes, Ivan Dujčev claims that a certain degree of scepticism regarding the connections between Manichaeism and neo-manicheist heretic movements (Bogomils, Patarines and Catharists) is not justified. Our primary source on Paulicianism, the Treaty by Peter of Sicily, reports that the Paulicians had planned a mission to Bulgaria to spread their doctrine. In his book, The Origins of the Dualist Church of Draguntia Bernard Hamilton also supports the theory that western heretics considered theirs and the Balkans to be “a single communion”. If anything, the real dichotomy was between moderate dualists and absolute dualists. In any case, both can be traced back to the Balkans. The Chronicles of Theophane itself attributes the movement of Asian troupes in Thrace to the spread of Paulicianism in the Balkans, since this was the original absolute dualist sect.

The link between the Bogomils and western girovagi was first made by the priest Cosmas in his anti-heretic lecture with the aim of highlighting the parasitical aspects of the "perfects". This implies that an active part of the sect was anxious to proselytise and was continuously moving from one village to the next, both to ensure that they were not a burden on the same group of believers and to spread the Bogomil credo in a more capillary manner. An inference which is reinforced by the fact that many homonyms in Macedonia still echo the names and nicknames bestowed on the sect's followers by people.

The diffusion of the Patarine faith in Bosnia starting in the 11th century gives us a glimpse into future links with the West, underlined by the arrival of the first crusaders and their return overland. The Bulgarian Council of Trnovo in 1211 was held in concomitance with the initiatives sponsored by Pope Innocent the II against the Albigensians. This is further proof of a common reaction against dualistic heresies. Dujčev, in order further to reinforce the hypothesis of such a bond, rightly reminds us that a Roman cardinal had been sent to the capital and to the Bulgarian court in 1206 to strengthen the ties between the Kingdom of Bulgaria and the Holy See. The fact that a number of orthodox opposers called the Catharist heresy the "Bulgarian heresy" can also be seen as evidence of the influence of Bogomil rites on Catharist rites. The Bulgarian origin of the Liber Sancti Johannis - one of the primary doctrines of the Catharists - and the diffused conviction amongst heretics in the West that their faith originated from Bulgaria, as well as the escape route taken by the Montaillou heretics when they went to Lombardy are all clues of a spatial continuity in terms of the roads, which branch out from Aquileia to the Balkans.

In spite of the obvious efforts made to disguise it, the spread of the Bogomil faith cannot but have taken place by overland routes. Extended periods of time saw missionary activities which, when combined with the escape routes, the support network and the need for daily exempla and for constant debates with the converts all induce us to surmise that the heretics normally travelled by foot. The enclosed promiscuity of a boat would have attracted attention and curiosity, which would have had to be satisfied in the long run.

Suspicion against pilgrims, especially those who manifested their religious fervour in unusual ways, were also expressed in Rome during the second half of the 10th century. On one occasion, while the Pope was presiding over a Synod at the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, an Armenian pilgrim entered the Basilica and began praying in an unusual manner - so much so as to raise the suspicion of being a heretic. Luckily "aderat tum ibi quidam religiosus et reverendus episcopus, qui ab Armeniae finibus peregre Romam petens... hæbatur egregius." He translated the Nicene Creed recited by his fellow pilgrim, putting the fears of the entire curia at rest.

35 Previously published amongst the Papers of the international conference on “L’Oriente cristiano nella storia della civilità”. Rome 1964, and now republished in “Byzantium and the Slavs: collected studies”, cit.
36 “Historia Manichaeorum qui et Pauliciani dicuntur”, in Patrologia Graeca CIV, col. 1239-1304.
38 Theophanes C.S.H.B. I, 662.
40 «The Bogomils» / Ivan Dujčev. - Cit. pg. 20.
41 Ibidem, pg. 21.
43 “Studente heretici exterris veluti oves incendere: mansueti, humiles et taciturni, et aspectu facies eorum pallescunt... Non est hominum, sed divinitatis reseratae: neque horum, neque ilium aliquem...” Theologia antibogomilistica etc., cit. pg. 53.
Apparently, a number of presumed heretics were hanged during the reign of Henry the II in Goslar, in the centre of Germany, solely because they refused to eat chicken. In fact, this was seen as a clear sign of dualistic heresy since the “perfectionists” refused all contacts with meat.45

What is most surprising - and what should make us think - is that pilgrimages on Balkan roads continued to take place during the late middle ages and into the modern era. These were individual cases of pilgrims who were, in their own way, an anomaly. However, they do help us understand that Balkan roads were never lost and that their life has continued, even though we have little evidence of this.

Bertrand de la Broquière, councillor to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy crossed the Balkans using the via Diagonalis on his return trip from the Holy Land in 1433.46

After a detailed description of Constantinople being held hostage by the Turks - who played an important role in Balkans (Sophia had become Turkish in 13892 and Thessalonica fell to the Turks in 1387 before being conquered by the Venetians in 1423) - and about to fall into their hands, the traveller from Burgundy left the city on 23 January 1433 travelling in the company of an Italian who had acted as an ambassador for the Duke of Milan.47

After a prolonged journey on the farthest points of the Via Egnatia, he returned to Adrianople accompanied by the Turkish gentlemen who had dealt with the Milanese Ambassador, before taking a sharp turn onto the Via Diagonalis and going to Philippopolis. At this point, he continued on to Sophia, and later made his way to Nyssa and Belgrade.

Lastly, in 1553 the Hungarian bishop Veratius transcribed the stops along the road between Belgrade and Constantinople. Some of the names had been changed and had become Turkish, but the most important stops mentioned were: Nys, Sophia, Philippopolis, Harianoples, Selymbria, confirming that it was still the Via Diagonalis.48


Not even the doctrinal conflict between Constantinople and Rome at the beginning of the 9th century were able put an end to embassies between the Papal State and the Orient.49

The Serbs and Croats also sent Ambassadors to Byzantium50 and Bulgarian embassies were established with the Kings and Emperors of the West.51

In 911-912 Petrus, son of the Doge of Venice Ursus Particiacus returned home from an embassy to the courts of Constantinople. For reasons unknown to us, he decided to travel by land. During his trip, he was captured and held prisoner by the Serbian regent of Zeta. According to the sources available, he could have travelled on the Via Diagonalis to Sardica and then turned towards the coast. More credibly however, given the events that followed, he probably travelled on the via...
Egnatia and then continued in the direction of the Valley of the Vardar after Thessalonica. The Bulgarian prince delivered him to Tsar Simenon of Bulgaria.52

Ambassadors bring and look for peace. What better way to seal a peace agreement than a royal wedding? The story of the nice of the basileus Romanos who took on the name Irene (Peace) and was given in marriage to Peter, son of Simon of Bulgaria to seal such an agreement is well known.53

When Romanos I imposed a Frankish bride - Bertha, daughter of Hugo of Provence - on Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the embassy from the west arrived in Constantinople during the course of a coup d’état led by Romanos’s sons against their own father. Siegfried, the bishop of Parma accompanied the bride. He declared his support for the legitimate powers with the help of the Amalfitans, the Gaetans and the Romans who lived in the city.54 It is highly probable that the Amalfitans and the Gaetans were in the city for business and that they had their own ships with them. The Romans however, who were there for political and religious regions instead, could have also travelled by land. In particular, they could have taken the via Diagonalis which connected Aquileia to Croatia, Bosnia and Bulgaria, all of which had close ties with the Roman papacy.

A rich literature exists on the three embassies headed by the bishop Liutprand of Cremona. The first of these took place in 949-51 under the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. The second was sent to Nikephoros Foca in 968 to ask for the hand of Princess Theophane for Otto II, the third was carried out in 971. This is partly because Liutprand, albeit partisan and acrimonious, was also one of the most reliable and wide-ranging sources of his times.55 As Liutprand himself tells us, he only employed the road network in the Balkans in part (on his return trip from his second voyage to Constantinople, “dopo quarantanove giorni di marcia a dorso d’asino, a piedi, a cavallo, digiunando, patendo la sete, sospirandoci, piangendo e gemendo, arrivai a Naupacto, città della Nicopolis”, before proceeding to Patras, Lefkada and Corfù), instead preferring, when circumstances and the weather permitted it, to travel by sea. However, a reading of the Antapodosis and the Relatio Constantinopolitana shows us that the byzantine court was constantly under siege from delegations and embassies from all the cardinal points. As such, we cannot exclude that some of these - or at least those from continental Europe - had travelled by road in the Balkans.

Liutprand’s father had also been invited to Constantinople by Hugo of Provence to negotiate with the Basileus Romanos (934-935). Unfortunately, he was assaulted by a band of Slavs in revolt near Thessalonica - and therefore while he was on the via Egnatia.56

The crusader William of Tyre also headed an embassy to the emperor Manuel I Komnenos, who was busy campaigning in Serbia near Ochrida in 1169. The description of the territory underlines its difficulty access and lack of agriculture as well as the richness of the mines, herds, cheeses and honey in the area.57


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54 Cfr. “Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World” / Arnold Toynbee, cit. – Scil. pg. 39.


56 “Detinebatur porro eo temporis articulo imperator in Servia quae regio montosa et nemoribus obsita, difficiles ad se angustiis et de impervia eorum regione. Habent vetustae traditiones hunc omnem populum, ex deportatis et deputatis habens aditus, inter Dalmatiam et Hungariam et Illyricum media jacet, rebellantibus Serviis et confidentibus de introituum


Lastly, in 1299 Theodore Metochite's caravan to Serbia left from Byzantium, touched upon Thessalonica and reached Skopje, where he performed his diplomatic duty. The fact that Serbian ambassadors on their way back home travelled with Metochite must also be noted.\textsuperscript{58}

All the ambassadors were touchy, whiny, and - when given the chance - made very undiplomatic comments against each other. Their role however, is proof that the roads existed and that they were travelled. The difficulties they faced, whether they were real or embroidered by a certain, welldiffused, classist snobbishness do not change the actual facts: Balkan roads worked, and worked well.

5. The role played by the Bulgarians.

In the beginning, the Slavs were nomads looking for lands on which to settle. With the invasion of Greece in the 7\textsuperscript{th} century and with the establishment of the state of Bulgaria in 685, they cut off the via Egnatia and isolated Thessalonica and Durrës form the rest of the empire.\textsuperscript{59} But not for long.

We have two separate accounts from different time periods which describe the methods used to re-establish normal inter-ethnic relations. The first source is John Caminiata, who wrote at the beginning of the 10\textsuperscript{th} century. He described how a public road bisected the city of Thessalonica from west to east, inviting travellers to stop and purchase the goods they needed in the city in exchange for beautiful, useful things. It was as if there were always huge crowds of people - including the Slavic inhabitants of the area – so much so that it would have been easier to count grains of sand in the sea compared to those who frequented the market.\textsuperscript{60}

The second account comes from Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish-Spanish traveller of the 13\textsuperscript{th} century who travelled on foot from Corinth to the North of Greece.\textsuperscript{61} He met 50 Jews at Sinon Potamo (perhaps Lamia in Thessaly) who lived near the mountains of Wallachia, where the Valack populations - perhaps the descendants of an ancient roman settlement of Dacians or the remnants of an old Slavina - usually robbed Jewish merchants, without however killing them, as they did with the Greeks. Obviously, "rob" must be translated as "demanded a tax," which was illegally levied to allow trade in the area.

I believe that this would have been the most obvious way to have intermediaries who would manage all normal dealings with areas under Slav and Greek control in the Balkans during the Middle Ages.

redeunti domino imperatori, post multiplices viarum labores, in provincia Pelagonia, in civitate quae vulgo dicitur Butella, occurrimus, juxta illam antiquam et domini felicissimi et invictissimi et prudentis Augusti patriam, domini Justiniani civitatem, videlicet Justiniam primam, quae vulgo hodie dicitur Acrea; ubi a domino imperatore honorifice suscepti, beneigne et imperiali elementa tractati, legationis et viae causam, formamque pactorum diligenter exposuimus; quae omnia multa inter se et inter se et inter se rate et rate, sed certe tanta, ut habemus, in mari quodam solito dimissi, Kal. Octobr. iter ad reditum arripuimus." Historia rerum gestarum in partibus transmarinis / Guillelmus Tyrrensis (PL 201).


\textsuperscript{60} «Ioannis Caminiatae De Expugnatione Thessalonicae» / recensuit Gertrudis Böhling. – Berolini et Novi Eboraci : Apud Walter de Gruyter et socios, MCMXXXIII. – Scil, § IX, 74-87 (S. 11). “Δεκάοιον γαρ δημοσίας της προς ανατολήν αγούσης από της δύσεως δια μέσω τρότε χρονισκός της πόλεως και αναγκαίως πευκάνσως τους παραδείνοντας προς ἡμάς ενδιατρίβει καὶ τὰς πρὸς τὴν χρείαν πορίζεσθαι, παν οτιους αν εἶπος τον καλοὺς εξ αυτῶν εκαρπούμεθα τε καὶ αγούσης απὸ της δύσεως διὰ μέσου τηςς πόλεως καὶ αναγκαίως πειθούσης τοὺς παροδεύοντας πρὸς ἡμας ἐνδιατρίβει καὶ τὰς πρὸς τὴν χρείαν πορίζεσθαι, παν οτιους αν εἶπος τον καλοὺς εξ αυτῶν εκαρπούμεθα τε καὶ αγούσης απὸ της δύσεως διὰ μέσου τηςς πόλεως καὶ αναγκαίως πειθούσης το网首页 of St. Cyril of Bulgaria in the 7th century and with the establishment of the state of Bulgaria in 685, they cut off the via Egnatia and isolated Thessalonica and Durrës form the rest of the empire. But not for long.

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The second "invasion" – in other words, the expansionistic phase of the Bulgarian Empire in the first half of the 10th century - is marked by two aspects: 1. we can attempt to read this expansion as a reunification of the Slavines, that is the western Balkan regions and Slavic speaking Greece; 2. or we can interpret it as a struggle between states following a failed attempt to enthrone a Bulgarian dynasty in Constantinople.

The second invasion carefully avoided the via Diagonalis, almost as if to avoid a direct confrontation with Byzantine lines of defence. However, it did not manage to avoid the via Egnatia - or what remained of it - and its northern and southern branches.\footnote{Cfr. «Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World», cit. – Scil. pg. 400.}

If it is true that western Bulgaria did not yet have a monetary economy at the time,\footnote{Ibidem, and see note 6 as well.} we must also assume that commerce - which was certainly limited – must have taken place by land, exclusively using overland routes. Exchanges entailing the use of commercial ships also require the use of commonly accepted currencies.

Naturally, other elements highlighting these cultural exchanges also exist: the Royal Palace of the King of the Bulgarians at Pilska was built by Greek architects, as a number of Greek inscriptions remind us.

I believe that the final part of the via Diagonalis - which was directly involved in the defence of the Byzantine Empire - was, at least in certain periods, off limits to commercial and civilian exchanges. This was the tract from Adrianople to Philippopolis, at least while the latter remained under Byzantine control.

Furthermore, once it was obvious that direct attacks were bound for failure, it also became clear that the aim of the Bulgarian Tsar was not the destruction of the other state, but a high ranking marriage which would allow him to install himself in Byzantium with a Bulgarian Imperial dynasty at the right moment. As such, civilians, travellers and traders with the right credentials must and could for the most part have felt safe when taking an overland route which crossed the border between the two Empires.

Foreign ambassadors had to feel somewhat less safe for the same reasons. They instead could represent potentially dangerous alliances between the bordering powers on opposing ends, perhaps through an appropriate matrimonial \textit{combine}.

In 865, all Bulgarian officials became Christians by decision of Prince Boris (852-889) and soon could count on their own liturgical language and hierarchy, as well as their own archbishop, who became Patriarch in 927. The patriarchate was abolished in 972, but re-established in 1235 until the kingdom fell into the hands of the Turks (1393-21396). The controversial events regarding the patriarchal competencies of Bulgaria - oscillating between Rome and Constantinople - are of little interest here, even if we must deduce that a regular flow of delegations between the two cities and the Bulgarian capital were probably seen.\footnote{A good summary of this can be found in “The Empire and its northern neighbours, 565-1018” / Dimitri Obolensky. – Formerly in «Cambridge Medieval History, IV part I». - Cambridge, 1966. – Now in: «Byzantium and the Slavs: collected studies», cit.}

Many scholars believe that the Balkan re-conquests of Basil II Bulgaroctonus and the conversion of Hungary are two of the elements which brought about a reopening of the overland routes to Jerusalem through the Balkans.\footnote{“The reconquest of the imperial territories in the Balkans by Basil II Bulgaroctonus and the conversion of Hungary in the early years of the century opened up a new and cheaper land-route to Asia Minor, and pilgrimages took on a more farfetched dreams – would have opened the doors to a dynastic substitution at the helm of the Byzantine Empire. Indubitably, the conversion of Hungary and its sovereigns represented an important source of reassurance for all those who desired the opening of new, even commercial routes, through the Balkans, especially from Germany. However, I firmly believe that if we look at it more closely and make Slav sources available to the West, and if we read those texts which failed ideologies have prevented us from reading in a more hodoeporic key, we will certainly find more substantial proof of this continuity in commercial terms - at least in the area where the Danube remains the main and most economic vector for trade.}

6. \textit{The role of the merchants.}\footnote{On this theme, I would like to remind Jadran Ferlag's essays. Particularly, “Mercati e mercanti fra Mar Nero e Adriatico : il commercio nei Balcani dal VII all'XI secolo”, which is his contribute for the XL Settimana di Studio del}
There is a type of traveller that nothing and no one can stop; not even war, or even worse, invasions. They are merchants, or if we want to be even clearer, slave merchants. We can find accounts of the presence of Spanish merchants in the Rhineland and Bavaria in 848 from late medieval sources. They must have traded in slaves captured during the eastern expansion of the Carolingian Empire.

However, if we go even further back in time to even more warlike eras we can also see how the Danube - like many of the other great rivers in Europe - appears to have been one of the main channels used for this type of trade. The same Havarian and Hungarian hordes who returned to their lands to fully enjoy the fruits of their pillaging could count on this type of merchant, who would indubitably have developed specific strategies to render themselves known as accepted. 67

The Byzantine Empire, once the wars had come to an end and hopefully lengthy truces had been negotiated, signed trade agreements with the powerful Slavs in order to ensure the supply of raw materials and foodstuffs for the enormous and populous enclave of its capital. 68

Upon signing its peace treaties, the Bulgarian State could not help but remember its position as a bridge between the manufacturers of rare raw materials and the artisans who worked these. 69

We also asked ourselves whether slaves were a good which could be made to transit over overland routes. What is indubitable is that these "goods" travelled prevalently by sea to Italy or to be sold to Arab potentates. Seaside cities - and Genoa in particularly - were a primary source of supply. The only overland route which could have been used to move these unfortunate souls is the one that would have taken them from Slavonia to the ports on the Black or Adriatic seas, where they would have been loaded onto ships to meet their unhappy destinies. 70

Where ambassadors travel, merchants soon follow. I know that this is a very unscientific statement, but it is logical. If nothing more, it reminds us not to lose faith when dealing with such difficult topics as medieval hodoeporics.

During the Middle Ages, trade in the Balkans took place predominantly within the coasts. If the historical roads were used for trade, it was done so for because of the cities they connected to the ports: the capital Constantinople, followed by Thessalonica, Durrës, Salona and Costanza and all the ports along the Danube.

**Ragusa** and **Kotor** rose to prominence because they were the two Adriatic end points on the road to northern Serbia, which was rich in mines and raw materials. 71

However, smaller cities which were apparently less important because they were not located on the coast, such as Adrianople, were also well populated with people and goods. However, what is more significant is that during Bertrandon de la Broquière's time, this city was also full of Venetian, Catalan, Genoese and Florentine merchants. 72 I do not think we can claim that a division between the roles played by Greek merchants - who specialised in the interior of the Balkans - and Western merchants - who specialised in trade on a wider scale - can be made in terms of travel. 73

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67 Grierson's superb provocation during one of the debates held in the XI Settimana di Studi di Spoleto is transcribed below. Unfortunately, it does not appear to have been used as a point for reflection or further study: "Mr. Arbman a noté que les missionnaires ont très souvent suivi les marchands. Moi, et ce n’est pas seulement pour le taquiner, je me demande si les marchands n’ont pas peut-être suivi les pillards. Les premiers pillages des Normands en Angleterre datent précisément de 790-800, à Lindisfarne dans le nord et à Dorchester dans le sud, et vers la même époque en Irlande. Il arrive assez souvent, quand par l’activité des pirates il y a une concentration de richesses dans un endroit, que le pillards sont suivis par des marchands pour le alléger d’une façon paisible de l’or et de l’argent accumulés de cette façon. On le voit très bien à la fin de l’empire romain quand l’historien Priscus décrit le camp d’Attila comme fréquenté par le marchants de l’empire romain. Leur but était de regagner pour l’empire la plus grande partie possible de l’or et de l’argent que les Huns avaient reçu en tribut du empereurs." (Op. Cit. p. 416-417).


Meaning that, in other words, although the great merchants would have preferred the sea, the vast majority must have travelled inland to find their goods. That is, they would have taken the most important roads available as well as those which could guarantee points where they could stop, rest and feed animals and goods - because the slaves needed to arrive in the markets in the West and Southern Mediterranean in good condition. Bertrand de La Broquières provides us with constant proof of this during his description of his journey as well.

However, it is the slave trade itself which allows us to go back once again and take a look at the darkest ages in the Balkans. Venetians and Amalfitans “erano attivi in questo ramo di commercio nella seconda metà dell’ottavo secolo”, wrote Ashtor,74 citing the letter written by Pope Hadrian I to Charlemagne in 776 where he complained of this regrettable trade.75 And who better to provide the raw material than those territories afflicted by ethnic conflicts? It is therefore logical for us to think of the Greek and Dalmatian coasts as well as the mouth of the Danube as natural points where Venetians and Amalfitans could go to stock up on their goods.

Apart from slaves, the famed iron from Carinthia - as mentioned by Ashtor - also rendered Aquileia a hub where the material was collected and sorted before it was supplanted by Venice.76 Given the frequency of wars at the time, how can we help but think that there was a certain level of demand for this raw material, which was even perhaps even semi-worked in Friuli, inland in the Balkans?

The Amalfitans, Venetians, Gaetans and Genoese were all well represented in Constantinople during the first half of the 10th century. In fact, as Ashtor notes, they took part in an armed conflict in the city in 944.77 The most highly prized goods at the time were indubitably silks and spices, which were in demand everywhere in western markets and were not available in the Balkans. However, if we take a look at where the colonies and emporiums of the Repubbliche Marinare were located along the coast of the Black Sea, we can see that a goodly portion of their trade took place inland with the Balkans.

7. Soldiers from the West.

“È sempre stato più facile penetrare e conquistare i Balcani dalla parte del continente che dal mare”, said Jorjo Tadic during a presentation at a conference held a long time ago.78 Although true, a statement such as this can be completely misleading. In other words, if we do not dig deeper, we could even end up accusing the roads of "colluding with the enemy." Instead, it is obvious that an attack by sea on the greatest maritime power of the ancient world would have required great organisational, logistical and even cultural commitment. This is something which the semi-barbaric hordes which travelled the Danube did not have. A first, unsuccessful maritime attack on Constantinople was launched by the Arabs and a second was launched by the Latins - who were instead successful.

As such, looking at the issue of soldiers who travelled on Balkan roads, we must also take into account the fact that in the vast majority of cases overland routes were the only roads available to knights, great numbers of soldiers, and armies comprised of people who did not have an advanced maritime culture.

Even before the Crusades, the Empire's defensive efforts against Arab attacks on Dalmatian coasts and its offensive moves against a weak Bulgarian Empire required the presence of mercenaries. Western knights made top quality mercenaries, even if they were often reluctant to join the Byzantine military system.

Hervé the knight was captured by the Turks near the lake of Van in Asia Minor in 1057.79 Together with the Norman Roussel de Baillleul,80 they were part of the defensive system on the eastern Byzantine front. They probably took the most direct overland routes available to reach Constantinople and offer their services to the Emperor.

Once the Normans had expelled the Byzantines from Southern Italy, they began to look at the Balkan territory as an area for further expansion. Between 1070 and 1185 - and almost always in concomitance with attacks by other powers on the Empire - the via Egnatia was steadily used by Norman contingents who pushed their way into the heart of Greece. The peak

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73 Unless I misunderstood, that is, if it does not solely limit itself to stating that Greek merchants did not have as wide a range of action as Western merchants, a similar thesis appears to be found in «Hommes d'affaires grecs et latins à Constantinople (XIIIe-XVe siècles)» / par Nicolas Oikonomidès. – Montréal-Paris: Institut d'études médiévales Albert-Le-Grand – Librairie J. Vrin, 1979. - (Conférence Albert-Le-Grand, 1977). – Scil. pg. 148 and pg. 88-91.


in their expansion and was reached in 1185 with the conquest of Thessalonica in August, followed by their defeat near Dimitrica on November 7 of the same year. This marked the end of the eastern expansions, at least until the fourth crusade.\footnote{81}

The only roads available at the start of the great crusading march towards the Holy Land were the ones across the Balkans. Large groups of - more or less armed - people, some of which were travelling on horseback, would have found it impossible to locate a fleet big enough not just to transport them, but to handle all the problems connected to the prolonged transport of men and animals as well.\footnote{82} All the scholars who have studied the crusades have described at least the main stops along the diagonal military road to Byzantium. The crusading armies faced difficulties either at the start of their voyage, when they left the German Empire and entered transdanubian Hungary, or after their crossing, near the Imperial capital.

The stops mentioned in the sources are always more or less the same: Malevilla (on the border between Hungary and Bulgaria), Bellegra (Belgrade), the river Maroc (or Maroam), the cities of Niczh (Naissus), Stermitz, Philippopolis (sometimes spelled Phinopoli) and Adrianople, before finally arriving in Constantinople.\footnote{83}

The deserta Bulgarorum - that is, the almost uninterrupted tract forest between Belgrade and Niczh which took eight days to cross – was the main feature of this route.\footnote{84} If we take into account the fact that the Bulgarians also deserted their cities in fear of the damages wreaked by such a large and composite army, the sense of abandonment must have been absolute. Only faith and the art of making did manage to propel the first waves of crusaders (those of Walterus and Glaterus Sensavier and of Peter the Hermit) to Constantinople.

The first practical consequence of the loca deserta was that food was often scarce, especially for an army with a lot of mouths to feed.\footnote{85}

The crusading followers of the count of Toulouse and the bishop of Le Puy who crossed the Balkans travelling from Aquileia and Slavonia to Durrës fared no better.\footnote{86}

The Count of Normandy and Stefano of Bois instead crossed the sea from Brindisi to Durrës and travelled down the via Egnatia without encountering too many problems.\footnote{87}

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\footnote{82} In terms of the size of armies transported by ship, approximately 50,000 men and 7,000 horsemen were cited by Agostino Pertusi in the debate which followed his presentation (quoted previously) during the XI Settimana di studio del Centro Italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo (ibidem, p. 175-176). What may be clearly inferred here is that none of the Repubbliche Mariane were ready to take on such a challenge in 1096.

\footnote{83} I checked the following sources: Historia expeditionis Hierosolymitana / Albericus Aquensis (PL 166), Historia rerum gestarum in partibus transmarinis / Guillelmus Tyrensis (PL 201), Historia Francorum qui ceperunt Jerusalem / Raimondus de Agiles (PL 155), Historia Hierosolimitana / Robertus Sancti Remigii (PL 155), Historia de Hierosolymitano itinere / Petrus Tudebodus sacerdos Suriacensis (PL 155), Historia Hierosolimitana / Fulcherius Carnotensis (PL 155), De Ludo vicii VII Francorum regis cognomento juniores profectione in Orientem cui ipse interfuit / Odo de Deogilo (PL 185), Historia ecclesiastica / Ordericus Vitalis (PL 188), Pantheon / Godefridus Viterbensis (PL 198), Historia Hierosolimitana / Baldricus Dolensis (PL 166), Liber IV (g) / Petrus Diaconus (PL 173), Chronicon / Helinarus Frigidi Montis (PL 212), Chronicon / Sicardus Cremonensis (PL 213), Itinerarium peregrinorum et gesta regi Ricardi / auctore Ricardo, canonicus Sanctae Trinitatis Londoniensis (edited by William Stubbs in Chronicles and Memorials of the Reign of Richard I. Volume I. – Wiesbaden: Kraus Reprint, 1964 – Rerum Britannicarum Scriptores).

\footnote{84} Albericus Aquensis, cit. Chapter VII: “silvas Bulgarorum per octo dies exsuperans, ad civitatem ditissimam, quae vocatur Niczh in medio Bulgarorum regno secessit.” Ibidem, Cap. IX: “per silvers et montana ac deserta loca”. Ibidem, Chapter XIII: “per opacum et spatiosum nemus, pars per abrupta montium, pars per deserta loca dispersi” and “per montes et silvas ac loca deserta” and Furthermore “minime alimenta in locis desertiis reperire aut investigare potuerunt”.

\footnote{85} Guillelmus Tyrensis, cit. Chapter IV: “nemora deserta et invia, et alimentis carentia”.

\footnote{86} Raimondus de Agiles, cit. Chapter I: “Sclavonia etenim est tellus deserta, et invia et montuosa, ubi nec feras nec volucres per tres hedobdamas vidimus. Incolae regionis adeo agrestes et rudes sunt ut nec commercium nobis, nec ducatum praebee voluerint, sed fugientes de vicis et castellis suis, debiles, anus, pauperes et infirmos, qui a longe prae infirmitate sua volucres per tres hebdomadas vidimus. Incolae regionis adeo agrestes et rudes sunt ut nec commercium nobis, nec ducatum

\footnote{87} “Cumque per tres dies vento deficiente in fluctibus altis detineremur, in quarto die exsuperans, ad civitatem dicissimam, quae vocatur Niczh in medio Bulgarorum regno secessit.” Ibidem, Cap. IX: “per silvers et montana ac deserta loca”. Ibidem, Chapter XIII: “per opacum et spatiosum nemus, pars per abrupta montium, pars per deserta loca dispersi” and “per montes et silvas ac loca deserta” and Furthermore “minime alimenta in locis desertiis reperire aut investigare potuerunt”.

The crusade of 1147 was also comprised of two main waves: the first of Germans belonging to Conrad II, and the second of crusaders belonging to Louis VII of France. Both travelled down the via Diagonalis. In this case as well, the locals and crusaders reciprocally denounced cruelties and betrayals. The most worrying conflict at the time took place in Adrianople and was partly triggered by uncontrolled elements under Byzantium’s pay. Nevertheless, drunkenness and the inability to communicate played a much more decisive role. The agreement which followed with the Basileus Manuel I Komnenos provided permission to travel in Asia Minor.

The knights-hospitalier orders often played an active and crucial role during these overland journeys. They seem to stand out in this case by their absence, at least in the historical documentation available in western languages, with the exception of a few archaeological discoveries described on the internet on non-scientific websites. As far as I am aware, mention of the capillarity of their settlements and the control the Templars and the hospitaliers had over roads in the west appear to be missing.

The Order of the Knights Templar owned a province in the northern part of the Balkans peninsula - Hungary - until 1170. The episode involving Pope Gregory IX, Colman of Ruthenia and the Duke of Slavonia as well as various religious and hospitalier orders (the Cistercians and the Templars as well as the Knights Hospitalier, the monks of the Hospitalier Order of Saint Lazarus, the Hospital of Saint Samson in Constantinople and the Order of the Teutonic Knights, who were expelled from the lands of the Borza, without the possibility of return, in 1225) and the attempt made by him to obtain abundantem, tentorium etendimus nostra. Mora autem per quatuor dies ibi factura, deinde Macedonia transeunte, per vallem Philippensium, et per Crisopolim, atque Christopolim, Messinopolim, Macram, Trajanopolim, Neapolim et Panados, Rodosto et Eracleam, Salumbriam et Naturam, Constantinopolim pervenimus. Ante quam urbem tentorior nostris extensis, per quatuordecim dies lassitudinem nostram alleviamus...” Historia Hierosolymitana / Fulcherius Carnotensis.


The Grand Master of the Knights Templar Evrand of the Barres was one of the abbassors who was sent to bargain for the passage of French crusaders with the Basileus Manuel I Komnenos. Cfr. «I Templari: un ordine cavalleresco cristiano nel medioevo» / Alain Demurger. – Milan: Garzanti, 2006. – Scil. pg. 201.


I saw an advertisement for a volume entitled «The Crusades and the Military Orders expanding the Frontiers of Medieval Latin Christianity» on the internet. It was edited by Zsolt Hunyadi and József Laszloszyvky and included a comprehensive section dedicated to “The Military Orders in Central and East-Central Europe” as well as contributions from Karl Borchardt, Balázs Stossek, Zsolt Hunyadi, Anthony Luttrell, Neven Budak, Libor Jan, József Laszloszyvky, Martin Wihoda. However, looking at the titles of the papers, the book does not appear to discuss areas south of the Danube or, in any case, areas connected to the via Diagonalis.

certain goods which had been unjustly sequestrated is well known. Mediation for the restitution was entrusted to abbot Czikádor from the diocese of Pécs.93

The Grand Master of the Knights Templar of the Kingdom of Hungary granted the Cistercians of Toplica (diocese of Zagreb) lands in Senj in Dalmatia ad domum edificandam and signed an agreement to reciprocally discourage the escape of members from one order to the other.94

Very few, late sightings of the Knights in the southern Balkans give them the appearance of being mercenaries hired by the Emperors to fight the Turks,95 who were in retreat by then.96

8. Temporary conclusions.

I made a conscious choice to base my research on larger themes in spite of losing the advantage of sequencing events. This is because each issue has specialists which are more valid and prepared than me. I hope that my inadequate recklessness will inspire them to make a contribution and to widen the horizon - of which we have but a glimpse now - with the final aim of confirming, or perhaps negating, the continuity of overland Balkan routes in time.

The summary at the beginning of my paper contains the presentation I gave at the Conference and explains the non-scientific reasons behind my research. Specialists will surely understand why I wanted explore a topic which, because of my lack of knowledge of Balkan languages, should have been off limits for me and I hope that they will be indulgent.

The Italian journalist Massimo Mucchetti97 wrote that the European Union was born of the concept that where goods transited soldiers would not. We have seen that goods, pilgrims and soldiers all travelled on the via Diagonalis and the via Egnatia, but not all at the same time.

Let us make sure that from now on these roads will once again see increasing numbers of goods and pilgrims.

Fabrizio VANNI
Centro Studi Romei <Firenze>
www.centrostudiromei.eu
fabriziovanni@alice.it
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94 Ibidem, pg. 237 and note 29; pg. 268 and note 141.
95 The development of medieval chivalry: ill caso di Firenze attraverso i riti cavallereschi / Lucia Ricciardi. – In: AA.VV. «I Templari. Una vita tra riti cavallereschi e fedeltà alla chiesa» cit. – Scil. pg. 155 note 19.
96 Roger de Flor was a Templar who fought against the Turks in the name of the Basileus Andronikos II. He died during a surprise attack on Adrianople in 1305 launched by the son of the Basileus. Cfr. «I Templari: un ordine cavalleresco cristiano nel medioevo» / Alain Demurger, cit. – Scil. pg. 344.