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Rethinking ruralization in terms of resilience: Subsistence strategies in sixth-century Caričin Grad in the light of plant and animal bone finds

Henriette Baron ^{a,*}, Anna Elena Reuter ^a, Nemanja Marković ^b

^a Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Leibniz-Forschungsinstitut für Archäologie, Ernst-Ludwig-Platz 2, D-55116 Mainz, Germany

^b Institute of Archaeology, Kneza Mihaila 35/IV, SRB-11000 Belgrade, Serbia

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ABSTRACT

The modes of subsistence of the early Byzantine inhabitants of the Balkans are subject to intense discussion. The core of the problem is the lack of sites of a clearly discernible agricultural character after the collapse of the *villa* system in late Antiquity and the question of how to interpret certain changes in the architecture and layout of fortified sites that indicate ruralization. Even though animal bones and plant remains are strong indicators for economical strategies, only few sites of the region have so far been put to bioarchaeological analysis.

Recent research in the early Byzantine city of Caričin Grad in Illyricum has produced new evidence for subsistence economies that sheds some light on the “rural” side of this splendid city, which was newly built in the foothills of southern Serbia in the fourth decade of the sixth century. The city comprises many features of classical urbanity and a large number of churches. Yet very modest dwellings were also found, as were several agricultural implements.

In this paper, preliminary results from the archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological analyses carried out in Caričin Grad are presented and situated in the context of published assemblages from other contemporaneous sites in the Danube provinces.

Whereas the “ruralization” of early Byzantine cities is commonly seen as a symptom of the decline of classical urbanity, this discussion of the findings aims for a positive interpretation, in which the ruralization of urban life can instead be seen as a clever strategy to enhance urban food security.

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1. Introduction

The early Byzantine Balkans, i.e. the area south of the Danube between the Dinarides and the Black Sea, are a special case regarding the transition from the Roman period to late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. With the loss of the Roman Empire's outpost north of the lower Danube in the area of today's Romania in the late third century, the Danube provinces became a border region and, at times, a frontier. For about a hundred years this border was constantly fortified and its military and civilian infrastructure strengthened. However, with the invasions and settlement by Goths from the late fourth century onwards and Huns in the mid fifth century, many Roman *castella* as well as the *villa* system south of the Danube were largely destroyed (Poulter, 2004, 2007). Only during the reign of Anastasios (491–518) and Justinian I (527–565)

were the Danubian provinces to some degree restored and their military strength reinforced. The early sixth century restorations along the Danube *limes* can be detected in the archaeological record, e.g. in Singidunum in Illyricum. The cities on the Sava and the Danube endured, as cemeteries from the late fifth and the early sixth century show. But even though imperial rule in the Balkans withstood several sixth-century barbarian raids, it finally collapsed in the early seventh century under Avar and Slav invasions (Sarantis, 2016).

Garrisons partly manned by *federati* were stationed in the fortifications on the Danube and played a role in the distribution of staple foodstuffs, as large amounts of amphorae indicate. The Danube, of course, was an important supply route for the military. At the same time, between the fifth and sixth centuries, fortified sites or *castella* were erected in protected mountainous regions of southern Illyricum, primarily as *phrouria* to protect the local population; there are barely any unfortified sites in this area (Ivanišević and Stamenković, 2014, p. 223).

A withdrawal of life from the plains of northern Illyricum to the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: baron@rgzm.de (H. Baron).

mountains can be detected. And in the fourth decade of the sixth century, the magnificent city of Iustiniana Prima, today's Caričin Grad, was built here in Dacia mediterranea, far away from the main communication routes, as a new administrative and episcopal centre (Ivanišević, 2016a, pp. 90–92; Ivanišević and Stamenković, 2014).

However, the system of *villae*, on which the agricultural production of the Roman centuries was based, had collapsed, and a new network of rural sites has not been archaeologically detected (Curta, 2001, 206). How then was the population of the Balkan provinces fed? The decline of the *villae*, the epitome of thriving and lucrative Roman agricultural life, is often seen as a sign that a strategic subsistence economy barely existed anymore and that people in the fortified cities and towns tried to make a living through state provisioning (*annona*), aided by small-scale urban farming (Curta, 2001).

For this article, the central point of this development is that the clear spatial division between city and countryside, between urban and rural, became blurred, and that typically rural activities and the people engaging in them entered the city walls – “ruralization” set in.

What evidence do we have that inhabitants of fortified cities carried out agricultural labour? First, there is written evidence: The seventh-century historian Theophylact Simocatta reports an Avar attack on Singidunum in 584 AD, describing how the Avars encountered the majority of the city's population outside the walls, harvesting the fields (Theophylactus Simocatta, hist. 1, 3–4; Ivanišević, 2016a, p. 93). Another seventh-century text, the Miracles of St. Demetrius, this time dealing with a Slav attack on Thessaloniki, reports a similar incident (Curta, 2001, p. 202).

On the one hand, the archaeological evidence is based on the large amounts of agricultural implements found at all kinds of fortified sites throughout the Balkan provinces (Milinković, 2007). Furthermore, changes occur in the layout of early Byzantine cities that point to a “severe degradation of urban space” and “a return to local rural traditions or a consequence of the invasions” (Saradi, 2006, p. 447). In Caričin Grad, many agricultural tools were found and the street grid on the North Plateau with its small-scale modest dwellings does not follow the city's original layout. In these dwellings, objects usually typical of rural places (e.g. sickles, querns) and that point to self-sufficiency were found (Ivanišević, 2010, 2016a). Moreover, public buildings appear to have lost their function and been used to erect small dwelling areas (Ivanišević, 2016b, p. 124). In some small fortifications as well as in cities, cowbells were found. A conspicuous example is the fort of Vresnice, at an elevation of 1300 metres on the Sjenica plateau in the eastern Dinarides, where cowbells represent the majority of iron finds (Ivanišević, 2016a, p. 97).

What we see in the Balkans of the sixth century is a picture of a region trying to make a living in a politically very hard time. The social changes observed, i.e. the indications that people working in agriculture constituted the larger part of the urban population, are usually subsumed under the term “ruralization”. However, this term is rarely used neutrally but often implies a judgment, evoking social decline and cultural deterioration rather than a necessary economic and social transformation in the face of changing circumstances (see e.g., Saradi, 2006, 441–470; Popović, 1982; Curta, 2001). After all, less than a century ago, the Western World witnessed a situation comparable in certain aspects to that of the sixth-century Balkans. During World Wars I and II, the governments of the USA, the UK, Germany, and other states encouraged their populations to contribute to the war effort by growing their own food, a movement known as “victory gardens” or “war gardens”. Urban dwellers, primarily women, began to plant potatoes and cabbages in former city parks and on urban brownfield sites – a

temporary ruralization of cities and metropolises like Berlin and London in times of crisis, and a necessary adaptation to changing circumstances.

In this paper, we want to explore whether the shift of agricultural activities to the city (i.e. its “ruralization”) might also be seen as evidence of a strategy to increase the city's resilience. For this purpose, we draw on a study that deals with sources of resilience for long-term food security in cities (Barthel and Isendahl, 2013). Stephan Barthel and Christian Isendahl have identified five factors that are crucial for urban food security: 1) urban gardening, agriculture, and water provision, 2) a diversity of food production systems, 3) the spatial patterning of food resources, 4) Trade resources and networks for the allocation of food, and 5) knowledge capacities for coping with crises. These factors shall be discussed here regarding Caričin Grad.

These aspects can help to gain a positive view of the ruralization discernible in the sixth century Balkans because they identify strategy and agency in this process. The collection of bio-archaeological data from Early Byzantine sites contributes to a better understanding of agricultural strategies in the region.

In this paper, we address the question of urban subsistence and the implications of ruralization based on the evidence of animal and plant remains from Caričin Grad. In order to put the plant and animal bone assemblage from this city into context, assemblages from other sites in the Danube provinces are taken into account, too.

2. Caričin Grad

In the fourth decade of the sixth century, Caričin Grad was built on an unoccupied hilltop approximately 395 metres above sea level between the Radan mountain (which rises to an elevation of 1408 metres) and the Leskovac basin in southern Serbia. The surrounding landscape is marked by gently sloping hills and has been used agriculturally since the Neolithic (Birk et al., 2016, 5). Research is quite confident that the ruined city represents the remains of legendary Justiniana Prima, the city Justinian I. reportedly erected close to his birthplace Tauresium in the western Balkans. The city was meant to become the episcopal and administrative capital of the prefecture of Illyricum. However, after only three generations, around 615 AD, it was abandoned, probably in consequence of Avar and Slav invasions (Ivanišević and Stamenković, 2010, p. 41). The city is divided into an upper town with an enclosed walled acropolis, which contained the episcopal basilica and administrative buildings, a fortified lower town, and several suburbs, some of them fortified (Fig. 1). Serbian and French archaeologists have been excavating the city for about a hundred years. Earlier campaigns focused on the acropolis and the lower town area, while more recent excavations have been carried out in the upper town area north of the acropolis. This is where the recent cooperative project “The Short Life of an Imperial City: Life, Environment, and Decline of Early Byzantine Caričin Grad” between the Institute of Archaeology Belgrade and the Römisch-Deutsches Zentralmuseum in Mainz comes in, which focuses on the modes of subsistence during the building of the city and its short existence (Birk et al., 2016). The three-year project draws on earlier findings as well as on archaeobiological data with a higher resolution gained more recently through flotation and dry sieving.

3. Material and methods

During the excavations of the lower town, larger bones and visible accumulations of plant remains were collected by hand. From these excavation campaigns in the lower town and also some parts of the upper town, 35 handpicked botanical samples,

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