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SLAVIC MIGRATIONS TO SOUTH ITALY IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

South Italy in the Early and High Middle Ages has been described as “a region open to a wide range of foreign influences. Beside the Langobards, Greeks and Normans, sources show the presence of Jews, Arabs, Armenians, Bulgarians, and others¹.”

The Slavs present in this period in South Italy, and their presence as plunderers and attackers, as well as settlers, has been noticed in historiography, most notably by André Guillou, Michele Fuiano, and Jean-Marie Martin².

The earliest known presence of Slavs in South Italy is mentioned by Paul the Deacon in his *History of the Langobards*: in 642 some Slavs came with many boats and camped near Siponto, killing the local Langobard ruler and Duke of Benevento, Aio, in ambush. They were outsmarted by Aio's blood-brother Radoald, son of Duke of Friuli, who knew their language. It is unclear who these Slavs were and what were their intentions and motives for this attack. They may have been either Croats or Narentan Slavs, later notorious for their pirate abilities. Another occasion for the appearance of Slavs in South Italy was the siege of Bari in 869–871. The city was in the hands of Arabs at the time and the Slavs from the eastern Adriatic

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¹ *A. Guillou, K. Tchérémissinoff, Note sur la culture arabe et la culture Slave dans le katépanat d'Italie, Mélanges de l'École française de Rome: Moyen Âge — Temps Modernes* 68 (1968) 677–692; *J.-M. Martin, La Pouille du VIe au XIIe siècle, Rome: École Française de Rome, Palais Farnese, 1993, 489–526.*

² *A. Guillou, Migration et présence Slaves en Italie du VIe au XIe siècle, Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 14–15 (1973) 11–16; *Z. Nikolić, The oldest Slavic settlements in South Italy, Raukarov zbornik, (2005), 75–82.*

coast participated in the siege as subjects of two emperors — Louis II of the Franks and Basileus I of Byzantium³.

However, it is more intriguing for our topic to consider the conquest of Siponto by *rex Sclavorum* Michael on 9 June 926, mentioned in the Annals of Bari. King Michael can be identified as a ruler of Hum, the area between the Neretva river and the city of Dubrovnik — Michael, son of Višeta. However, he was also known as an ally of the arch-enemy of Byzantium in that period — Simeon, emperor of the Bulgarians, whom he was supplying with valuable hostages such as Peter, son of the Venetian doge Ursus II Particiacus. It is possible that Michael's attack on Siponto was connected to his alliance with Simeon.

Another question is why was it precisely Siponto, a city in the south of the Gargano peninsula, that was the target of both known Slavic invasions? It is true that the Adriatic islands come closest to the Italian coast in this area. Advantages of this route were well known to the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, who wrote in his work *De administrando imperio* that “under the control of Dalmatia there is a close-set and very numerous archipelagos, extending as far as Beneventum, so that ships never fear to be overwhelmed in those parts”.

Even old maps and archaeological excavations show that the western Adriatic coast was far more hospitable in this area concerning navigation and anchorage in the past than it is today. Therefore, it is not too surprising that, if we look for the possible traces of Slavic settlement in Italy, we find them on the Gargano peninsula (Monte Gargano), mentioned in several documents from the cartulary of the monastery of St. Mary on the islands of Tremiti.

There are some undoubtedly Slavic names (Lastaka, Maleša, Nežedrag, Ljubac, Vitadrag) titles (*iupanus*) and toponyms (Lesina, Devia and ets) appearing in the eleventh-century documents. In 1054 Norman count Robert appears with the former *župan* Ljubico (*lubiko*) and his people as the donator of the church of St. Mary by the sea at Devia; it seems that the relations between the Norman lords and the local community of Slavs were not hostile, but the Norman conquest nevertheless meant the end of Slavic self-rule at Gargano⁴. The title of *župan* is not mentioned in documents afterwards. The presence of Slavic settlers can be observed in other regions of South Italy in the High Middle Ages. Sixty Slavs were foot-soldiers in

³ A. Guillou, *Italie méridionale byzantine ou Byzantins en Italie méridionale? Byzantion — Revue internationale des Études Byzantines* 44 (1974) 153–158.

⁴ M. Fuiano, *La colonia slava di Devia nel corso del secolo XI, Congressi sulle relazioni tra le due sponde adriatiche, Rivista storica del Mezzogiorno* 14 (1979) 39–52

the company of Robert Guiscard at the beginning of his career in the late 1040s and early 1050s⁵.

Slavic traces are also visible in place names on the Gargano peninsula. First of all, there is the name of the littoral village of Peschici (castellum Pesclizzo in 1053) — whose literal meaning would be “small sands”, which is in accordance with the geological appearance of the area. The even more important settlement of Lesina, mentioned in 1023, is connected with the Slavic name of the Dalmatian island of Hvar, which derives from the Slavic word *les* — forest.

The traces of early Slavic presence can be found in place names in the areas surrounding Gargano as well — for example, a Via Sclavenesca appears in 1093 in Castellum Novum in the western part of the diocese of Troia. As well as Lama de Sclavis in Terlizzi in 12th century. The earliest traces in place names can be found in the area of Trivento (around Chieti) at the end of the tenth century, as well as later, in the twelfth century — Rocca de Sclavis on the coast, contrada Sclavorum and Fons de Slavia in 1203 in the territory of Termoli, etc.

Also the most of the slaves mentioned in the documents in South Italy from the mid-eleventh until the late twelfth century were Slavs by origin. The court of Bari even proclaimed in 1127 that no Christian men and women were to be held as slaves except those of Slavic origin. The first slave-woman of Slavic origin has been attested as a part of a dower in Bari around 1057. A Dalmatian slave-girl owned by a nobleman from Siponto was cured from leprosy at the shrine of St. Nicholas in Bari around 1100.

Since in 1054 Count Robert appears with the former župan Ljubico and his people as the donor of the church of St. Mary by the sea at Devia, it seems that the relations between the Norman lords and the local community were not hostile, but the Norman conquest nevertheless meant the end of Slavic self-rule at Gargano. The title of župan is not mentioned in this document or afterwards.

In conclusion: the presence of Slavs on western Adriatic coast can be ascertained quite soon after the settlement on the eastern shore, although the sources speak only of isolated war. Nevertheless, toponomastic and onomastic traces indicate the presence of Slavs in a wider area of South Italy, and for the beginning of the eleventh century. The formal Slavic expansion ended with the arrival of the Normans in 1054, which probably contributed to the already ongoing assimilation⁶.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ G. Loud, *The Age of Robert Guiscard: Southern Italy and the Norman Conquest*, Longman London, 2000, 100–101.