

Vasilj L. Jovovic, PhD

The area of today's Montenegro in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages

Faculty of Philosophy, Nikšić, vasiljjovovic@yahoo.com

Abstract: During Roman rule, the area of today's Montenegro became part of the province of Illyricum, (subsequently the province of Dalmatia), and from 297 AD it became part of the province of Praevalitana with its seat in Scodra (Shkodra, Skadar). During the division of the Roman Empire in 395 AD, the province of Praevalitana became part of the Eastern Roman Empire. Over the following centuries, the area of the Balkan Peninsula, including the province of Praevalitana, was exposed to barbarian attacks (from the Goths, Avars and Slavs). During the Avar and Slavic incursions in the 6th and 7th centuries AD into the territory of the Eastern Roman Empire, the imperial rulers, as well as the church authorities, underwent a complete decline in many areas of the Balkan Peninsula, including the province of Praevalitana.

Key words: Praevalitana, Shkodra, Montenegro, the Middle Ages

According to the administrative reforms imposed by Emperor Diocletian in 297 AD, the Roman Empire was divided into four prefectures: the Orient, Illyricum, Italy and Gaul, which were further divided into dioceses. The prefecture of Illyricum was further divided into the dioceses of Macedonia and Moesia, which was reorganised as new provinces (Dacia, Dardania, and Upper and Lower Moesia), and together these formed the province of Praevalitana. The newly founded province of Praevalitana was separated from the ancient Roman province of Dalmatia in 297 AD, or perhaps a little later in 305–306 AD.

The separation of the province of Praevalitana from the province of Dalmatia emerged due to difficult communication ties by sea with the city of Salona (modern-day Solin in Croatia), the centre of the province of Dalmatia, although by the

end of the 3rd century AD, the Roman Empire had formed a good network of roads connecting Salona with today's territory of Montenegro and northern Albania. Under Roman Emperors Diocletian and Constantine the Great, the province of Praevalitana became part of the diocese of Moesia; in approximately 396 AD it was added to the diocese of Macedonia, and from 400 AD to the diocese of Dacia. When Roman Emperor Theodosius divided the Empire into the eastern and western parts in 395 AD, the province of Praevalitana became part of the Eastern Roman Empire, thus becoming a border province.

In 437 AD, with the marriage of the Western Roman Emperor Valentinian III to Eudoxia, daughter of the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II, the entire prefecture of Illyricum belonged to Theodosius II, and thus Praevalitana was no longer a border province (Kovačević, 1967: 241–242; Zagarčanin, 2014: 50).

On the western side, the province of Praevalitana bordered with the province of Dalmatia, to the north with the province of Upper Moesia, to the east with provinces of Dardania and Macedonia Salutaris, and on the south-eastern side it bordered with the province of New Epirus. The western border probably went from Budva northwards, coinciding with the borders between the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, Mount Lovćen, around the Sinus Rhizonicus (the Bay of Kotor) in Krivošije and today's city of Nikšić, and then along the River Piva all the way to the confluence of the Rivers Piva and Tara.

On the southern and eastern sides, the border ran along the River Mathis, the Black Drim to

its confluence with the White Drim, and along the Shar high mountain range (Scardus Mons) to the Upper Ibar River. The northern border most probably went through Mount Durmitor, the Sinjajevina Mountains, through Kolašin and Vasojevički Komovi to Rugova, Mokra Gora, Podgor and Suva Planina, to the Ibar Valley.

The coastal towns of Olcinium (Ulcinj) and Lissus (Lezhë) formed parts of province of Praevalitana, including the continental towns of Doclea (Duklja) and Scodra. The conclusion was reached that Scodra must have been the capital of this province, based on letters from the Bishop of Rome, Pope Leo I, from 446 AD and from Pope Gregory I. The organisation of the church always coincided with state-administrative structures throughout the Roman Empire; namely, in a letter from Pope Leo I, the Bishop of Scodra Seneca II was called archbishop (metropolitan), and a letter from Pope Gregory I mentioned John the Archbishop of Scodra. This data leads us to conclude that Scodra was indeed the capital of the province of Praevalitana (Kovačević, 1967: 242).

The province was governed by a *praeses* (pl. *praesides*) with the title *vir clarissimus* or *vir perfectissimus*. *Praesides* were chosen from the ranks of senators and equestrian officials and were titled with certain other high positions, such as *iudex*, *rector* or *moderator*. The duty of the *praeses* (*praesidiatus*) consisted of performing administrative and judicial duties and functions, but it did not include military functions, given that the reforms by Emperors Diocletian and Constantine I separated the military and civil authorities in the provinces (Kovačević, 1967: 243).

The *dux* was the highest military officer and he commanded the military affairs of one or more provinces. In the beginning, there was no army in the province of Praevalitana, as there had been no army in the province of Dalmatia either since the time of Emperor Vespasian. The situation changed when the province of Praevalitana became a border area of the Eastern Roman Empire, especially when it found itself bordering with the enemy state of the Ostrogoths. In the province of Dalmatia, an army and navy were maintained during the reign of Emperor Leo I (457–474 AD). At that time, an army was probably maintained in Praevalitana (Kovačević 1967: 244–245).

At the end of the 4th century AD and beginning of the 5th, the invasion of the Visigoths into the province of Praevalitana lacks any firm archaeological traces, making it rather difficult to understand the extent to which the Visigoths plundered and ravaged the province of Praevalitana (Kovačević 1967: 251–252). Half a century later, the Ostrogoths appeared on the borders of Praevalitana (459 AD), ravaged Illyricum, penetrated New Epirus and plundered Dyrrhachium (Durrës, Drač) having been deprived of their subsidies by the Eastern Roman Emperor Leo I. After an agreement with the imperial rulers, the Ostrogoths withdrew to Pannonia.

Twenty years later, in 478 AD, the Ostrogoths, led by Theodoric the Amal, invaded Epirus in a war against the Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno. From New Epirus, the Ostrogoths penetrated into Praevalitana. In the vicinity of Shkodra, an Ostrogothic double-richly decorated button with semi-precious stones and the heads of a Gothic mythical bird have been found. Some philologists have connected the etymology of the name of the Hoti tribe and the toponyms of the Hoti region and the *Hotski virovi* area on the north-eastern shores of Lake Skadar with the presence of the Goths in the vicinity of Scodra. After the assassination of Emperor Julius Nash in Salona, the Germanic leader of mercenary troops in Italy, Flavius Odoacer, occupied the whole of Dalmatia (480–482 AD), and thus came into direct contact with the Eastern Roman Empire.

Identifying and recognising the danger from Odoacer, the Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno incited the Ostrogoths against Odoacer, and Theodoric of Amal soon destroyed Odoacer's state and created his own Ostrogothic state in Italy (493 AD). Theodoric also occupied Dalmatia, where the Eastern Roman emperor remained only a nominal sovereign ruler. Theodoric had included within his state the western border areas of the province of Praevalitana, the area around the present-day town of Nikšić, where the Roman castrum Anderba was located, and the eastern part of the province of Dalmatia, the Sinus Rhizonicus. The castrum Anagastum originated from the period of Gothic rule (Kovačević, 1967: 252–254; Ostrogorski, 1983: 82).

The Ostrogoths temporarily conquered the city of Doclea (489–490 AD) and later took ad-

vantage of the catastrophic earthquake in 518 AD to mount a plundering campaign on Doclea (Kovačević, 1967: 254).

The Ostrogoths held the occupied territories by a military presence, which was probably small in number, and formed military garrisons in castrums, separate from the local indigenous population. Also, the Ostrogoths differed from the local population in religious terms because they had accepted Christianity in their ancestral lands in the form of the Arian heresy, preached by Arius of Alexandria (4th century AD), not recognising the unity of Father and Son and thus denying the divinity of Jesus Christ. The Ostrogoths formed their own church structure and special church communities.

Thus, in Salona, the centre of their power in Dalmatia, the Arian church community functioned alongside Orthodoxy (Kovačević, 1967: 255). The re-establishment of complete imperial authority in the province of Praevalitana took place during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (527–565 AD), when the church structure was re-established (Vujičić, 2007: 31). Namely, from 535 to 555 AD, a Byzantine campaign against the Ostrogothic Kingdom took place, resulting in the latter's conquest and it being placed under Byzantine rule (Ostrogorski, 1983: 89).

It is believed that an archbishopric was organised in Scodra, the centre of the province of Praevalitana, at the end of 4th century AD. The first known bishops of Scodra were Basso and Senecius, who were mentioned in a letter from Pope Siricius c. 392 AD (Kovačević, 1967: 257; Vujičić, 2007: 21; Mijović, 1998: 44). Also, in addition to Scodra, the bishoprics of Doclea and Lissus were the episcopal centres in Praevalitana. Bishop of Doclea Evandar (*Euandrus episcopus civitatis Diocliae*) was mentioned as a participant in the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD (Mijović, 1998: 39).

At the end of the 4th century AD, the province of Praevalitana was annexed to the province of Eastern Illyricum, and a church district was formed within it with its seat in Thessaloniki and whose exarch had patriarchal authority over the subordinate regional archbishops and bishops. When, after the *Henotikon* of the Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno in 481 AD, a rift arose between Rome and Constantinople, the situation in Eastern Illyricum was unsettled in terms of the relations

between the Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Illyrian Episcopate, the Roman Curia and the Exarchate of Thessaloniki. At that time, the bishops of Praevalitana were left to themselves regarding church matters, until the reign of Emperor Justinian I (518–527 AD) saw the re-establishment of union between the Eastern and Western Churches.

With the formation of the Archbishopric of Justiniana Prima by the 19th amendment of Emperor Justinian on 14 April 535 AD, the province of Praevalitana came under its jurisdiction. At the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 553 AD, Phocas, Bishop of Scodra, appeared as a representative of Justiniana Prima, supporting the policy of Emperor Justinian (Kovačević, 1967: 257–261).

In terms of cultural matters, the geographical position of the province of Praevalitana, located on the border of the eastern and western spheres, led to cross-penetration and influence from both East and West in the cultural life of the province, which was reflected in the architecture and art. Linguistically, the province of Praevalitana in late Antiquity belonged to the sphere of Latin. The River Drim, and the ancient Roman Via Egnatia were at that time the boundaries between the Latin and Greek languages, and therefore the respective civilisations.

In the interior of the province of Praevalitana, as well as in neighbouring New Epirus, romanisation was superficial (Hrabak, 1991: 91). In the province of Praevalitana, in addition to the churches in Doclea, Antibarium (Bar) and on the Sinus Rhizonicus, several church buildings from the 5th and 6th centuries AD are known of, such as the basilicas in Budimlja, Kolovrat-on-Lim, and on the hillfort near the village of Martinići near Spuž (Kovačević, 1967: 267–271).

The remains of an early Christian basilica were discovered under the complex of today's Church of St. Peter in Bijelo Polje (Vujičić, 2007: 34). The most intensive construction activity in the province of Praevalitana, as well as in other provinces of the Empire, was during the reign of Emperor Justinian and was reflected in the construction of military fortifications and sacral buildings. Basilicas were mostly built in cities that were the seats of bishoprics or archbishoprics (metropolitan archdioceses) (Vujičić, 2007: 21, 31).

At the beginning of the 6th century AD, there was a trend of abandoning cities as agrarian centres, and the episcopal estates around large churches were turned into the centres of new agrarian areas. According to Pavle Mijović, this was the case everywhere on the coast around Doclea, in the parish of Nikšić, and in other parishes and areas of the province of Praevalitana. Remains of an early Byzantine basilica have been found near Berane in the village of Budimlja (Mijović, 1998: 47).

The devastation of the province of Praevalitana by Ostrogoths caused damage to the church structure. During the Goths' destruction of Doclea, two Christian basilicas were destroyed, one of which was the cathedral church. One of them was restored only in the 9th century AD as a cruciform church. During this period, the church centre was moved from Doclea to the Zatica site in Doljani, where two churches have been discovered next to each other: a spacious three-nave basilica and a triconch church (Kovačević, 1967: 263).

The church administrative structure in the province of Praevalitana disintegrated in the face of the invasions by the Avars and Slavs at the end of the 6th century AD. The first two waves of Slavs were stationed in Old and New Epirus and Greece, but also in Praevalitana. In 548 AD, the Slavs reached Dyrrhachium, and in 587–588 AD, after a failed siege of Thessaloniki, they spread throughout Ancient Epirus and Greece. This Slavic wave also spread north of the River Vojuša. The Bishop of Lissus had to leave his diocese and temporarily take refuge in Italy, where he also stayed in the middle of 592 AD (Hrabak 1991: 92).

Bishop of Lissus finally fled to Italy in 599 AD in order to avoid the invaders, and the Bishop of Rhizon (Risan) was last mentioned in 595 AD. In historical sources, the existence of the organisation of churches in Scodra and Doclea was last mentioned in 602 AD. The third great Slavic wave (around 615 AD) led to the Slavic settlement of the province of Praevalitana. During the 7th century AD, especially during the first two decades, the disintegration of state power in the Balkans, and thereby the province of Praevalitana, the destruction of cities, large migrations, and radical changes in these areas resulted in the destruction of the church organisation, which was re-established at the beginning of the 9th century AD (Kovačević, 1967: 263; Hrabak, 1991: 92).

The Slavic invasion was of far-reaching significance for the Balkan Peninsula. Over time, the Slavs flooded the entire peninsula to the Adriatic and Aegean Seas and to the Gulf of Corinth. At the beginning of Justinian's rule, South Slavs, together with Bulgarians, began constant incursions into the Balkan provinces of the Empire, despite strong fortifications on the River Danube and in the interior.

However, given the fact that the Byzantine army was spread across other fronts – in Africa, Italy and Spain – there was no one to defend the Balkan provinces. The Slavs were initially satisfied with plundering the Byzantine lands and returning to their homeland with their plunder across the River Danube, but over time they began to settle permanently on the Balkan Peninsula (Ostrogorski, 1983: 90–91).

During the rule of Byzantine Emperor Maurice (582–602 AD) and due to frequent attacks by Slavs, unrest on the Balkan Peninsula persisted, which intensified with the arrival of the Avars on the Pannonian Plain, which prompted the Slavs to invade the Empire, destroying the Byzantine defence system.

The Balkan Peninsula was abandoned to the Slavs (Ostrogorski, 1983: 99; Mijović, 1991: 69–83). Around 614 AD, the centre of the Byzantine administration in Dalmatia, Salona, along with the most important cities in the interior of the Balkan Peninsula, was destroyed, thereby ending Byzantine rule and civilisation in this area. A similar thing happened with the province of Praevalitana, where only some city fortifications remained under Byzantine rule, such as Butua (Budva), Scodra and Lissus, compacted within medieval ramparts (Ostrogorski, 1983: 110; Dragoljović, 1991: 35).

Most of the Balkan Peninsula, especially its interior, was in the hands of certain Slavic tribes. Byzantine writers called these areas, which were in fact outside the reach of Byzantine rule but without their own state organisation, "*scлавина*" (Ostrogorski, 1970: 10–11; Ostrogorski, 1983: 111).

During late Antiquity, the area of today's Montenegro was almost entirely, except for the Bay of Kotor, part of the province of Praevalitana (from 297), with its centre in the city of Scodra. The province of Praevalitana was without military garrisons until it became the border area of the Eastern Roman Empire. From the end of the 4th

century AD, the organisation of the area's churches was established in the province of Praevalitana. There was a mixture and permeation of Eastern and Western cultural influences in the province of Praevalitana, due to its border position.

The province of Praevalitana was severely damaged during the invasion of the Ostrogoths, but in the 6th century AD, during the reign of Emperor Justinian I, the province underwent a renewal of its cities and church organisational structure. At the end of the 5th and the beginning of 6th centuries AD, due to the Slavic-Avar invasion of the Balkan Peninsula, the cities and church organisations in the province of Praevalitana were destroyed and would remain so for a long period of time.

Bibliography

Vujičić, R. (2007). *Srednjovjekovna arhitektura i slikarstvo Crne Gore*. Podgorica: CID.

Драгојловић, Д. (1991). Етничке промене на тлу позноримске провинције Превалитане. У: *Становништво словенског поријекла у Албанији* (Зборник радова са Међународног научног скупа

одржаног на Цетињу 21, 22. и 23. јуна 1990) (35–42). Титоград: Историјски институт СР Црне Горе.

Загарчанин, М. (2014). О Скадру и Доклеји у провинцији Превалис на основу археолошких свједочанстава. *Историјски записи*, (1–2), 49–66.

Ковачевић, Ј. (1967). Провинција Превалис. У: *Историја Црне Горе, Књига Прва, Од најстаријих времена до краја XII вијека* (241–277). Титоград: Редакција за историју Црне Горе.

Мијовић, П. (1991). Команска култура и питање доласка Словена у Превалис. У: *Становништво словенског поријекла у Албанији* (Зборник радова са Међународног научног скупа одржаног на Цетињу 21, 22. и 23. јуна 1990) (69–83). Титоград: Историјски институт СР Црне Горе.

Мијовић, Р. (1998). *Od Dokleje do Podgorice*. Cetinje: Centralna narodna Biblioteka Republike Crne Gore „Đurđe Crnojević“.

Острогорски, Г. (1970). *Византија и Словени*. Београд: Просвета.

Острогорски, Г. (1983). *Историја Византије*. Београд: Просвета.

Храбак, Б. (1991). Ширење арбанашких сточара по равницама и словенски ратари средњовековне Албаније. У: *Становништво словенског поријекла у Албанији* (Зборник радова са Међународног научног скупа одржаног на Цетињу 21, 22. и 23. јуна 1990) (85–130). Титоград: Историјски институт СР Црне Горе.