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Banditry in the Medieval Balkans, 800–1500

Panos Sophoulis

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In memory of my father

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Contents

Abbreviations

AA	Archives de l'Athos, Paris 1937–
BBOM	Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs, Aldershot 1996–
BF	*Byzantinische Forschungen*, Amsterdam 1966–
BM	*Bulgaria Mediaevalis*, Sofia 2010–
BMGS	*Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, Oxford 1975–1983, Birmingham 1984–
Bsl	*Byzantinoslavica*, Prague 1929–
Byz	*Byzantion*, Brussels 1924–
BZ	*Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, Leipzig/Munich 1892–
CFHB	Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, Washington, DC *et al.* 1969–
CSHB	Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1828–1897
DAD	Državni *arhiv* u Dubrovniku
DOP	*Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Washington, DC 1941–
DOS	Dumbarton Oaks Studies, Washington, DC 1950–
DOT	Dumbarton Oaks Texts, Washington, DC 1996–
EB	*Études Balkaniques*, Sofia 1964–
ECEEMA	East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450, Leipzig/Boston 2007–
EHB	*The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh Through the Fifteenth Century*, eds. Angeliki Laiou *et al.*, 3 vols., Washington, DC, 2002
JÖB	*Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, Vienna 1969–
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Hannover/Berlin 1826–
MGH *SRG*	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum, Hannover 1871–1965

MGH *SRG* n.s.	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum n.s., Berlin/Weimar 1920–1967
MGH *SS*	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, *Scriptores*, infolio, Hannover 1826–
RESEE	*Revue des Études Sud-Est Européenes*, Paris 1944–
TM	*Travaux et Mémoires*, Paris 1965–
ZRVI	*Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta*, Belgrade 1952–

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It is generally accepted that from antiquity down to early modern times banditry was endemic in many parts of the Balkans. Although its impact was relatively marginal, it clearly constituted a considerable hazard to local safety and order. The activity of robbers and highwaymen often disrupted communications and trade, and could severely undermine the productive capacity of the countryside, especially in poor agricultural and pastoral communities. In fact, it was precisely these societies that provided the perfect habitat for the emergence of banditry during the Balkan Middle Ages. Hard pressed by the poverty-stricken life of the small landowner, the dependent peasant or the mountain herdsman, many men had little choice but to turn to crime.

There can be little doubt that banditry was already festering in the Balkans during the early medieval period.[1] The surviving sources provide some glimpses of the activity of local brigands and marauders, among them the Slav *Skamareis*, a notorious robber band that appears to have operated in the Lower Danube region from the sixth century onwards.[2] Nevertheless, on the whole, the source material for this period is so scanty that we can scarcely make any general observations on the history of Balkan banditry. By contrast, the picture to be drawn from later texts and documents offers a far better guide to the subject. For the fourteenth and

[1] For Balkan banditry during Roman times, see Vanacker 2012.
[2] Menander Protector, *History*,150; Theophanes, *Chronographia*, I, 436 (Trans.: 603).

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fifteenth centuries in particular it may be argued that the available evidence is, in some cases, sufficiently detailed to allow the formation of firm conclusions about the problem of brigandage in the region.

One of the main problems historians encounter when examining the sources of the period in question is that medieval writers often use the term 'bandit' to express a variety of concepts. In this light, it is essential to establish a methodological framework from which we can approach the question of 'real' or 'common' banditry in the Balkans, a task that is undertaken in Chap. 3. In view of the working definition adopted there, various acts of violence that are described in the sources as banditry will not be considered in this investigation.

If the phenomenon of brigandage in the medieval Balkans is to be meaningfully analysed, attention needs to be paid to the geographical, economic and social context in which it developed. For the most part, bandits operated in rural settings, quite often in isolated and relatively inaccessible areas. In this inhospitable terrain, a well-organized network of roads, which medieval rulers had inherited from the Romans, provided vital links between towns and countryside, secured the spread of central authority and facilitated commercial activity. These roads attracted bandits for two reasons: first, because they were frequented by merchants, civil and ecclesiastical officers, artisans, monks and pilgrims, most of whom were expected to carry with them cash or other valuables. Second, because the impregnable locales traversed by many of these roads were sufficiently forbidding to prevent the effective penetration of urban institutions; effectively, they demarcated the limits of central authority. Given the very weak structures of policing the countryside in Byzantium and the other Balkan states, even a small mountain or forest might suffice to offer a refuge.

Next to be assessed are the general economic and social conditions attendant in the medieval Balkans—especially in rural areas—from the ninth century onwards. It is self-evident that the intensification of banditry during this period was predicated upon a substantial level of prosperity. To an extent, this was a result of the state of relative peace that had been established over much of the peninsula following the Byzantine conquest by the Macedonian emperors. The growth of regional trade, which was largely due to the activities of Italian merchants, was another contributing factor. But while there is little doubt that, overall, the rural population benefited from the expansion of wealth and the general rise in the standards of living, one suspects that many saw no noticeable improvement in their condition.

It is precisely to this segment of the rural society that historians need to turn their attention in order to sketch out the social background from which brigandage arose. Destitute peasants and herders are often assumed to be associated with banditry, and indeed the evidence provided by our sources seems to confirm this hypothesis. The latter in particular lived mainly in groups far removed from the towns and cities that represented centres of government control and, additionally, were on the move for significant parts of the year. This freedom, when combined with the need to be well armed to protect their herds and pastures, created a situation in which they could rather easily use their indigenous skills to prey on others for a livelihood.[3]

The social network within which these men operated may have complicated the situation. Much like their Ottoman or early modern counterparts, medieval bandits depended for survival on broader networks of local support, which was usually seen as divided into two basic types: the kinship links in which the bandits were enmeshed and, outside this, the broader community in which they lived. As will be shown in Chap. 5, the evidence drawn from the archives of the city of Dubrovnik has enriched our understanding of how these networks were formed and functioned in practice.

A set of questions that arise in connection with brigand groups themselves are also discussed in that same chapter. A thorough analysis of the surviving sources may provide valuable clues as to their structure, size and methods of operation. By the same token, attention should be drawn to the victims of bandits. In many cases, our sources provide sufficient information about them, thereby enabling a classification according to their professional background.

An essential part of this investigation concerns the measures taken by the authorities to enforce law and order in areas affected by banditry. Despite the fact that during the period under discussion the Balkans were dominated by powerful, centralized governments (most notably in Byzantium and Serbia), it is clear that the latter were not always able to keep peripheral regions firmly under control. In fact, the impression one gets from the available evidence is that most brigands showed a clear understanding that the state's weakness created numerous opportunities for profit. How, then, did the authorities attempt to control banditry, and how effective were these efforts? These questions will be dealt with in

[3] Shaw 1993, 316.

Chap. 6, where both the legislative and on-the-ground responses to outbreaks of banditry will be investigated.

While brigandage in the medieval Balkans developed within its own unique historical, social and economic circumstances, it would be interesting to place it into a broader European context. To this end, a comparison between Balkan and western European evidence is attempted in Chap. 7. The parallel patterns of criminal activity that are uncovered are extremely instructive. Two points in particular stand out. The first concerns the general conditions under which banditry arose in these two regions; in both instances, poverty appears to have played an important role. In addition, it is clear that rural violence tended to spin out of control during times of political, military and social unrest. The second point concerns the people involved in banditry. As in the Balkans, peasants, soldiers and members of the nobility feature prominently in reports of criminal activity in western medieval kingdoms, and this cannot be wholly coincidental.

The second part of Chap. 7 is devoted to the 'search' for real or fictitious bandits in Balkan oral tradition. Numerous ballads and heroic songs celebrating the deeds of such figures survive from the Ottoman era, so there is every reason to believe that bandits should also have been the subjects of song and story during the Middle Ages. To be sure, while the heroes of many outlaw legends never actually existed, the background of these accounts is undoubtedly historical. The inspiration behind them is the everyday oppression and dreadful poverty to which the mass of common people in the Balkans were subjected during the period under consideration.

While medieval Balkan bandits are truly fascinating objects of study, historians have not given them the amount of attention that they deserve. This may have something to do with the absence of large and diverse source material before the fourteenth century. In any case, only a handful of publications—most of them articles in journals—have dealt with the topic, and none explores in depth the fundamental questions related to it. The best survey published thus far was that by Mark Bartousis (1981) on brigandage in the late Byzantine Empire. Although focusing his discussion on a relatively small number of incidents (some of which took place in the Balkan provinces of the empire), Bartusis made a significant contribution to the understanding of the workings of banditry in Byzantine society, highlighting in particular the role played in it by soldiers. Catherine Asdracha (1971) provided useful insights into the phenomenon of brigandage during the second Byzantine civil war (1341–1347), much of

which was fought on Thracian and Macedonian soil. More recently, Elena Gkartzonika (2012) turned her attention to the career of Momčilo, a Bulgarian bandit-chieftain, to whom Vasil Gjuzelev (1967) had also devoted a monograph more than fifty years ago.

Particularly important for the study of banditry in its Balkan context is the vast body of documentary evidence contained in the State archives of Dubrovnik. The medieval material that has been published over the past several decades casts an entirely new light onto many aspects of brigandage, thus enhancing our overall understanding of the phenomenon. The work Esad Kurtović (2012, 2014, etc.) has brought to the surface a wealth of information concerning the activity of Bosnian and Dalmatian bandits in the 1300s and 1400s. His pupil Elmedina Duranovič supplemented his findings in a doctoral dissertation defended in 2017, which dealt with the history of highway robbery in medieval Bosnia.

Two essential studies for the history of banditry, which sparked widespread debate in academic circles and inspired a great deal of fresh research, are Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (1959) and *Bandits* (1969).[4] There, Hobsbawm constructed the concept of social banditry, a primitive form of class struggle and class resistance in agrarian and frontier societies. Although criticized as methodologically unsound or theoretically flawed, the central notion of social banditry still serves as a referential starting point for any discussion of the social history of crime in general.[5] Nevertheless, in a study of brigandage in the medieval Balkans such as this, the question of the appropriateness of this model should inevitably be raised. Indeed, as will be seen in Chap. 3, the concept of social banditry is hardly applicable here, even though some of Hobsbawm's criteria for its appearance are clearly present.

In view of the various methodological and other problems associated with the study of Balkan banditry, the primary aim of this book is not to produce a detailed history of the phenomenon, but to discover how bandits bear on the history of the medieval Balkans. The analysis undertaken below will hopefully make a significant contribution in this direction.

[4] A revised edition of Hobwbawm's *Bandits* appeared in 1981 from Pantheon Books in New York. Citations are to this edition.

[5] Cronin 2016, 845.

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CHAPTER 2

A Note on the Sources

Undoubtedly, the main problem related to the study of banditry in the medieval Balkans is methodological. It concerns the nature of the sources available to us. To an extent, what we can know about banditry between the ninth and fifteenth centuries has to be put together from brief references to such matters in narrative, documentary and hagiographical accounts. These sources never directly report an event, or in neutral terms: their authors write for quite another purpose, and do not consciously intend to collect and record information on this specific subject. As a result, the information that they provide is often too general or vague, and cannot operate as a conclusion on the phenomenon of brigandage at any given time. Thus, for example, in the 1380s Demetrios Kydones complains that "no matter where one goes, mountains or plains, bandits are lying in wait".[1] Statements such as this are fairly typical in Byzantine texts. They describe in very general terms the nature of the problem but offer no specific evidence that would allow us to get a grasp of its particular characteristics.

Another difficulty presented by medieval authors is the fact that they use the word 'bandit' to express a range of concepts, quite different from that of its original meaning—the common robber.[2] To be sure, the

[1] Demetrios Kydones, *Correspondence*, 175, no. 264.

[2] This confusion may have something to do with the selective definition of banditry in Byzantine legal texts. According to them, "all those who formally declare war on the empire,

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medieval usage of the term was often metaphoric: it was applied to ring-leaders of rebellions and challengers of legitimate power, invading forces or unreliable mercenaries, to mention but a few examples.[3] Consequently,

or against whom the empire has declared war, are considered enemies of the state (*polemioi / hostes*). All others are simply bandits and pirates"; *Basilika*, IV, 34.1.24, 1556; *Corpus iuris civilis*, I, 50.16.118, 861; see also the discussion in Chap. 6.

[3] Thus, in a letter to the Frankish ruler Louis the Pious dated to 824, the Byzantine emperor Michael II had described the rebel Thomas the Slav as a brigand who robbed and pillaged at the head of an army of infidels: [….] primum quidem coepit cum eis exercere latrocinia et alios vi sibimet sociare; *Michaelis epist*., 476. For the background of these events, see Lemerle 1965, 255–297. Likewise, Leo the Deacon calls the army of Bardas Skleros, who had rebelled against Basil II in 976–979, a robber band of conspirators: Εἶτ' αὖθις ἐπεὶ τὸ λῃστρικὸν τῶν συνωμοτῶν τοῦ Σκληροῦ Βάρδα τελέως ἐσκίδνατο, τὰς δυνάμεις ἀνειληφὼς ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ Βασίλειος ἠπείγετο κατὰ τῶν Μυσῶν; Leo the Deacon, *History*, 171 (Trans.: 213). In the thirteenth century, Lachanas-Ivailo, a pretender to the throne of the second Bulgarian state, is said to have lived a brigand's life: ὃς πολλοὺς προσεταιρισάμενος τῶν χυδαίων καὶ ἀτασθάλων λῃστρικὸν ἐπετήδευσε βίον; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, I, 131. According to Anna Komnena, Peter the Hermit called his followers "bandits and robbers" (λῃστὰς ἀποκαλῶν τούτους καὶ ἅρπαγας), a description which may not have strayed far from the truth; *Alexiad*, 301 (Trans.: 252). In the fifteenth century, the author of the *Chronicle of the Tocco* casts Pele Oliverio Franco (Liveri), the Italian conqueror of the fort of Clarentza in the Peloponnese, as a "bandit, lord, murderer, brigand and plunderer" (Λιβέρην τον ἐλέγαν,—λῃστής, δυνάστης καὶ φονεάς, ρυμπάρος καὶ κουρσάρης); *Chronicle of the Tocco*, 484, lines 3548–3549. Frequently bands of nomadic warriors are also presented as brigands. Thus, Saint Lietbert, bishop of Cambrai (1051–1076), one of the first western pilgrims to travel through the Balkans en route to the Holy Land in 1054, encountered a group of horse- and camel-riding bandits in the so-called 'Bulgarian desert', that is, the Velika Morava valley: Pretergressus Pannoniorum fi nes limitaneos ingreditur solitudines saltuosas, quas deserta Bulgariae nominant quasque latrunculi Sciticae gentis inhabitant; *Vita Lietberti*, 854–855. For Lietbert's *Life* and in general for his episcopacy, see Ott 2007, 137–159. Quite the same way, George Pachymeres, *History*, I, 33 (Trans.: 5), claims that the Turkomans, who had settled in mountainous areas on the Byzantine-Seljuk frontier, found it profitable to live like brigands and rob and plunder their neighbours: [….] συμφέρον ἐδόκει ἀφηνιάζουσι καταφεύγειν πρὸς τὰ τῶν ὀρῶν ὀχυρώτερα καὶ, τὰ πλησίον κατατρέχοντας, νόμῳ λῃστῶν ἀποζῆν. Elsewhere, the same author claims that Osman's actions were those of "bandit gangs" (λῃστρικῶν συμμορῶν); George Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis*, I, 26. Finally, Byzantine sources frequently describe Catalan mercenaries as brigands. For example: Ἐπὶ δὲ τοὺς Κατελάνους αὖθις τρεπτέον τὸν λόγον. [….] Ἔπειτα ἀπογνόντες ἐντεῦθεν τῶν χρειωδῶν ἔγνωσαν ἐπὶ τὰ πρόσω πορεύεσθαι τὰ ἐν ποσὶ λῃϊζόμενοι, μέχρις ἂν ἀποχρῶσαν καὶ μόνιμον εὕρωσιν οἴκησιν. Καὶ δὴ διαβάντες τὴν πρὸς θάλασσαν ὀρεινὴν τῆς Ῥοδόπης ᾖεσαν ἀδεῶς λαφύρων συχνῶν ἑαυτοὺς ἐμπιπλῶντες; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, I, 244–245; Ἦν δὲ ἡ διήρης αὕτη τῆς Μιτυλήνης, σταλθεῖσα παρὰ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ τοῦ ἡγεμόνος ἐν τῇ Χίῳ τοῦ μαθεῖν, εἰ ἄρα ἐκ τῶν ἑσπερίων ἤλθασιν λῃστρικαὶ νῆες τῶν Κατελάνων, ἵνα δώσωσιν νόησιν τοὺς γείτονας Τούρκους τοῦ φυλαχθῆναι. Ἦν γὰρ ἐξ ἀρχῆς τοῦτο τὸ μήνυμα δουλεία ἀνελεύθερος τῶν Λεσβίων, ὅπως μὴ φθάσαντες δοῦναι λόγον τῆς ἐφόδου τῶν

modern readers might find it difficult to understand precisely what sort of bandit is under discussion. Speaking of banditry and its definitions in the Roman Empire, Thomas Grünewald has argued that the frequent use of the robber metaphor for various types of people led to even Roman writers being no longer aware that the usage was metaphorical. They used the word *latro* not as a figure of speech, but as a term with multiple meanings of which, in any particular instance, they had just one in mind.[4] This may have also been the case in medieval times.

A further problem related to the analysis of the surviving evidence involves the reliability of official accounts. Indeed, it is often assumed that, in contrast to narrative or hagiographical sources, official or semi-official documents are, as a rule, objective, and should therefore be dealt with as unproblematic from a source-critical viewpoint. Thus, for example, when it is reported that, thanks to the actions of a certain ruler, a kingdom was cleansed of brigands, historians generally tend to take this information at face value, although in reality what we are dealing with is a typical *topos* of praise.[5]

Hagiographical texts represent another important source of information for the conditions of the Balkan countryside during the Middle Ages. Indeed, criminals of all sorts, including bandits, were a principal concern for saint's *Lives*. There were several reasons for this. First, from a theological perspective, any form of crime, whether violent or non-violent, was ascribed to the working of the devil. It was he who, according to John Chrysostom, arms the robbers and brigands, and helps them find our most valuable possessions.[6] Criminals thus serve as symbols of evil, which the saint eventually conquers by his courageous witness for Christ. The second reason why bandits came into hagiographical texts is because the genre was designed to illustrate the power of love, but also the saints' essential characteristics as persons of divine or holy attributes. The power of love and forgiveness was well set off when shown in triumph against violence. It might frustrate a brigand's intention, for instance, by a

ληστῶν, εἴ τι ἄρα ζημία γενήσεται ἐν τοῖς Τούρκοις, αὐτοὶ οἱ Λέσβιοι τὸ ἀνῆκον τοῖς Τούρκοις ἀποδώσουσιν; Doukas, *History*, 416–417 (Trans.: 252–253).

[4] Grünewald 2004, 2.

[5] Reuter 2006, 42–44.

[6] John Chrysostom, *Hom. on First Thess.*, iii, 414B-C. Likewise, according to the *Life of St Nikon Metanoeite*, the criminal behaviour of the bandits to whom the saint had preached is attributed to demonic influences; see *Life of Nikon*, 180–183 and 238–243, for yet another episode involving bandits acting under demonic influence.

miracle.[7] It might even convert a violent felon to a peaceful shepherd, as in the case of the bandits of Mount Paroria in the *Life of St Gregory of Sinai*.[8] The third reason is that monks, hermits and 'holy men' were among the best-travelled men of their time. In addition, they often shunned the fortified but crowded monastic centres in favour of the Balkan wilderness. They were subsequently particularly vulnerable to attacks.

Although they can be of great value, saint's *Lives* are also a dangerous source which need to be treated with caution, since they always informed by a clear ideological programme.[9] Indeed, in an attempt to represent the saint in the best possible light, and thus encourage readers to imitate the piety and spiritual purity of the protagonist as far as they were able, the *Lives* break up into a series of clichés (created out of the pattern of the life of Christ, the apostles and the fathers of the Church), so that most hagiographical texts display many elements in common.[10] Perhaps unsurprisingly, episodes in which a saint is confronted by bandits occur very frequently, in both Byzantine and Slav (especially Serb and Bulgarian) *Lives*. Undoubtedly, in some cases these stories can be all too easily discarded as mere *topoi* of the genre. To be sure, where such accounts arouse suspicion by their content, the historian should adopt a strict policy of taking no item of information on trust, unless it is corroborated by other texts shown to be reliable, it includes details firmly rooted in a particular time and place, or it fits neatly into a well-known historical framework. The following episode from the *Life of St Gregory of Sinai* may help to illustrate this point: sometime around 1328, the saint was forced to leave Mount Athos because of the incursions of Turkish brigands and pirates, and after wandering through many places, he ended up at Paroria, at the northern edge of the Strandža Mountains in Thrace.[11] Initially he settled at a place called Messomilion, where another monk named Amiralis had already established himself. Gregory's presence annoyed Amiralis, who demanded that the saint depart instantly from the area, otherwise he

[7] Murray 1978, 63.

[8] *Life of Gregory of Sinai*, 346. For the theme of the converted bandits, see Wortley 1966, 219–240.

[9] Brubaker–Haldon 2001, 199.

[10] For some of the problems related to the study of hagiographical sources, see the discussion in Brubaker–Haldon 2001, 199–202; Howard-Johnston 1999, 6–7, 15–20; Paschalidis 2011; Talbot 2011. See also Patlagean 1983, 101–121; Lifshitz 1994, 95–113.

[11] For the date of the saint's departure from Mount Athos, see Soustal 1991, 359. Tachiaos 1983, 117, thinks Gregory left around 1331.

would hire brigands to slay him and his disciples. Seeing the danger, Gregory's party went off to a local mountain, but a few days later a band of brigands sent by Amiralis fell on them, bound up Gregory, took whatever was of value and left.[12] Following these developments, Gregory returned to Athos, only to leave a second time because of the danger posed by brigands. Between 1335 and 1341 he arrived once more at Paroria, where he founded a large monastery at Mt Katakekryomenon and three smaller lavras nearby.[13] Nevertheless, the robbers who were active in this area continued to harass him and his disciples. Realizing that only the ruler of Bulgaria Ivan Alexander (1331–1371) could put down the brigands, Gregory appealed to him for help. And indeed, the Tsar responded by giving him money and various supplies, and by building a strong tower for the monk's defence.[14]

At first sight, the story of Gregory's adventures at Paroria might be regarded as a commonplace. It is very difficult to say, for instance, if the episode with Amiralis ever took place. On the other hand, it must be remembered that the *Life* was written by a former disciple of the saint, the patriarch of Constantinople Kallistos (1350–1353, 1355–1363), who was writing soon after the events for an audience who themselves may have also known Gregory. In other words, his account could not stray far from the truth. Significantly, the evidence he provides for the unruly situation at Paroria and Mount Athos in the fourteenth century can be corroborated by many other texts.[15] The same is true of the tower raised by Ivan

[12] [….] καὶ ὁ εἰρημένος Ἀμηραλῆς, διασεσεισμένας ἔχων τὰς φρένας, ἀφελὴς ὢν πάντῃ καὶ κοῦφος καὶ σφόδρα περὶ τὸ δοξάριον τόδε τὸ κατὰ ἀνθρώπους ἐπτοημένος, παραπλὴξ γίνεται καὶ αὐτὸς ὁμοίως ὑπὸ τοῦ φθόνου καὶ ὡς καπνοῦ σμῆνος κινήσαντος ἀνάπτεται κατὰ τοῦ θείου τούτου ἀνδρός, δεινῶς ἐμπιπράμενος ὁ φρενοβλαβὴς καὶ ἀτάκτως ἀνακράζων οὕτω καὶ θορυβῶν ὁμοῦ καὶ διαπειλούμενος, ὡς, εἴ γε μὴ τάχιον φθάσας ὁ μέγας ἐκεῖθεν ἐξέλθοι, φατρίαν ληστῶν συγκαλεσάμενός τε καὶ μισθωσάμενος ἄρδην ἅπαντας ἡμᾶς ἀποτελέσει· [….] ὀλίγων δέ τινων διελθουσῶν ἡμερῶν, κατόπιν [ἡμῶν] παρ' ἐκείνου δὴ τοῦ ἐλαφροῦ καὶ βασκάνου γέροντος, νυκτός, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἀνομίαν διαμελετῶντος ἐπὶ τῆς κοίτης, καλῶς γὰρ αὐτὸν ὁ θεῖος Δαυῒδ πρὸ ἡμῶν ἐστηλίτευσε, λῃσταί τινες ἀθρόον ἐξαπεστάλησαν παρ' αὐτοῦ, οἳ καὶ λεόντων δίκην ἐπιδραμόντες πάντας ἠνδραποδίσαντο [….]; *Life of Gregory of Sinai*, 340–341; Bartusis 1981, 390–391.

[13] For the monastery at Mt Katakekryomenon, see in particular Andreev 1993, 18–32; Gorov 1972, 64–75. See also Soustal 1991, 305–306.

[14] *Life of Gregory of Sinai*, 343–344.

[15] See below, Chap. 5. See also the Greek and Slavonic versions of the *Life of St Romylos of Vidin*, another disciple of St Gregory who lived in Paroria until the early 1350s; *Life of Romylos of Vidin*, 124–126, 129–130 (Trans.: 32–33, 36; Slavonic version: 12–14). See also Devos 1961.

Alexander, which is mentioned in the *Life of St Theodosios of Tărnovo*, also written by the Patriarch Kallistos.[16] All this strongly suggests that the text includes information of considerable value for the study of Balkan banditry in the late Middle Ages. Numerous other *Lives* have, likewise, been shown to be of demonstrable worth.

A particularly important body of evidence for the historian of the period in question is Byzantine epistolography. Letter-writing was one of the most prominent forms of writing in the Byzantine era, as the approximately 15,000 letters that survive from the fourth to fifteenth centuries clearly attest.[17] The extant epistolography represents almost exclusively a small segment of the Byzantine society—the social, political and economic elite.[18] Letters deal with a wide range of subjects, but for our purposes by far the most important are those describing travel experiences in the Balkans. Several such accounts have been preserved. Nearly all are composed by highly educated state or church officials, who travelled in the region on official missions or other business. As a rule, these men perceive their journeys as utterly unpleasant experiences, a perception that is heavily influenced by their socio-cultural background. Their biased interpretations of the places in which they find themselves reflect the general cultural Constantinopolitan attitude towards the 'provincial' world. To be sure, in addition to the feeling of cultural alienation which they all felt, the main reason they abhorred travelling was the serious discomfort and grave dangers associated with it. Subsequently, the feeling of unease, fear and insecurity occupies a central place in their narratives.[19]

[16] The *Life* has survived only in Bulgarian: *Life of Theodosios of Tărnovo*, 17 (Trans.: 291–292). See also Kislelkov 1926; Ivanova 1986, 648–656. More recently, Rigo–Scarpa 2018, 467–482.

[17] Papaioannou 2010, 189–190.

[18] For general surveys of Byzantine epistolography, see Hunger 1978, I, 199–239; Mullett 1997; Brubaker–Haldon 2001, 276–285; Grünbart 2001, 7–43; Papaioannou 2010, 188–199.

[19] For an excellent discussion, see Galatariotou 1993, 221–241. A good example of this feeling of insecurity on the road is offered by a letter written by Manuel II (1391–1425) to Demetrios Chrysoloras, dated between 1403 and 1408, in which the emperor complains that he was unable to complete the composition of a theological treatise while travelling, due to the bad weather and the fear of attacks from bandits: [….] καίτοι θαυμαστὸν ἄν δόξειεν, εἰ τὸ πολὺ τῶν ὑπὲρ τούτου πόνων διήνεγκα ἐν ἀλλοδαπῇ, ὅπου καὶ πελάγη τεμεῖν ἀνάγκη καὶ ποταμοὺς διαβῆναι καὶ δεδιέναι ληστῶν ἐφόδους καὶ κακῶν ὁδοιπορίας συχνῆς ἀνέχεσθαι [….]; Manuel II Palaiologos, *Letters*, 119, no. 44.

Despite the literary embellishment that is readily apparent in these accounts, there can be no doubt that the occasional encounter with brigands was a particularly traumatic experience for medieval travellers. Letters such as those written by Nikephoros Gregoras on the way to the Serbian court early in 1327 or by the bishop of Ephesos Matthew Gavalas, who describes his journey from Constantinople to the city of Vrysis in Thrace in the summer of 1332, are extremely informative, first-hand testimonies to the dangers lurking on the Balkan roads.[20] It is largely thanks to such accounts that the career of the Balkan bandit emerges, at least partly, into the light of history.

Among the most useful sources for the understanding of the history of banditry in the medieval Balkans are the reports of various kinds contained in the State archives of Dubrovnik. The archive was established in 1277 and the material it preserves offers invaluable information related to the political, economic, social and legal development of the Ragusan Republic during the Middle Ages (and until its liquidation in 1808). During the first half of the nineteenth century, some of this material was either removed or re-classified by the Austrian authorities, making its study extremely difficult.[21] Nevertheless, over the past several decades thousands of documents have been published, mainly thanks to the work of Josip Lučić, Mihailo Dinić, Jorjo Tadić and Bariša Krekić, which have thrown fresh light on the history of Dubrovnik and the regions with which the city had political and commercial relations.[22]

Among all these documents, by far the most important for the study of banditry are the reports on lawsuits and court cases that started to be recorded by the middle of the fourteenth century and are mainly included in the series *Lamenta de foris*.[23] Some additional evidence can be culled from the *Diversa cancellariae* and the *Diversa notaria*, both of which contain reports on activities of administrative, judicial and economic nature.[24] Dozens of cases of highway robbery and banditry can be found there.

[20] Nikeph. Gregoras, *Letters*, II, 103–115, no. 32a and 115–124, no. 32b; Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 192–201, no. 64. For the epistolography of Nikephoros Gregoras in general, see Sklaveniti 2019.

[21] Carter 1972, 589; Lonza 2003, 45–46.

[22] See for instance *Spisi dubrovačke kancelarije*, I–IV; *Iz Dubrovačkog arhiva*, I–III; Tadić 1961; Krekić 1961; Krekić 1980.

[23] *Lam. de foris* (138 vols., 1348–1598), containing descriptions of crimes committed outside the city.

[24] *Div. canc.* (235 vols., 1282–1815); *Div. not.* (147 vols., 1310–1811).

They were brought forward by the victims of attacks—many of them merchants—perpetrated along the busy arterial routes connecting Dubrovnik with the Balkan interior. These reports usually include the names of the transgressors, as well as a list of the stolen goods, thereby providing vital clues to the activity of brigands in the region. Particularly important is the work carried out on some of this material by Esad Kurtović, who, among other things, investigates the history of several Vlach communities in what is today south-western Bosnia.[25] The members of these communities maintained close social and economic ties with Dubrovnik, but at the same time they were also engaged in all sorts of criminal activity as a means of supplementing their income.[26] Additional evidence from the Dubrovnik State archives has recently been presented by Elmedina Duranović, who focused specifically on the history of highway robbery in medieval Bosnia.[27] Her research, along with that of Kurtović, has yielded a wealth of information that enhances our understanding of the phenomenon of brigandage in its western Balkan context.

Legal texts along with state and royal charters, such as those issued by the Serbian rulers in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, shed important light on the policies and practices deployed by Balkan authorities to control banditry in their territories. Indeed, the threat posed by bandits during the Middle Ages is addressed by legislation in most Balkan states, which prescribed harsh penalties for offenders, but also for all those who aided or protected them. In some texts, the right to compensation for victims of highway robberies, especially foreign merchants, was explicitly laid down. This is particularly the case with the code of Stefan Dušan, the *Zakonik*, which contains numerous articles dealing with issues related to the activity of brigands in the Serbian realm.[28]

Unfortunately, the information derived from the written sources discussed above is rarely corroborated by archaeological evidence. This is scarcely surprising, bearing in mind that, as a rule, bandits tried to leave as little trace as possible of their presence. Thus, while it is very likely that some of them hoarded their most valuable pickings (carrying around large amounts of money would certainly arouse too much suspicion), there is practically no way of telling if a hoard found in a particular area can be

[25] Kurtović 2012; Kurtović 2014.
[26] See the relevant discussion in Chap. 5.
[27] Duranović 2017.
[28] The legislative responses to banditry are presented in Chap. 6.

associated with the activity of local bandits. Nevertheless, there is at least one case where the evidence provided by written sources is confirmed archaeologically. Several texts, including two saint's *Lives*, report the building of defence towers across the Balkans, with the intention of providing protection against bandits and pirates.[29] Several such structures have been identified by archaeologists, mainly in Byzantine Macedonia. Most of them were raised in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a time of growing insecurity in the entire region, and were manned by professional guards or peasants who policed the surrounding countryside or simply acted as watchmen.

To summarize this review of the surviving evidence, it is important to emphasize once again that while the historian of banditry in the medieval Balkans has at his disposal a relatively wide breadth of source materials, reliable assessments as to the precise nature and scale of the problem are only obtainable, first, from a few reports of concrete instances contained in chronicles and letters and, second, from the growing documentary evidence preserved in archival collections, most notably the State archive of Dubrovnik, which records hundreds of cases of highway and house robberies in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Hagiographical texts occasionally offer valuable insights into the topic and complement certain aspects of the picture presented by the other texts. Pieced together, the information which all these sources supply can help provide a comprehensive treatment of the subject, especially for the late medieval period.

[29] *Life of Gregory of Sinai*, 344; *Life of Theodosios of Tărnovo*, 17 (Trans.: 291–292); Thomas of Split, *History*, 236–237.

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CHAPTER 3

In Search of the Balkan Bandit

The phenomenon of banditry in the Balkans for the period under consideration is relatively well documented, as a variety of literary sources, including chronicles, letters, legal documents and hagiographical texts, contain useful material. The available evidence makes it abundantly clear that the problem was particularly widespread in the region and affected all levels of society. However, banditry tended to become endemic when the power of state authorities waned, that is, during periods of intensive warfare, internecine strife and social unrest.

Despite the frequency with which the term 'bandit' (*latro / lestes / razbojnik*) comes up in the surviving Byzantine, Latin or Slav sources, it is still difficult to establish a precise meaning for the word since it was often applied to men who were not simply traditional brigands existing on the periphery of mainstream society. Thus, for example, usurpers or challengers of legitimate power, competing feudal lords and clansmen, underpaid soldiers and unruly mercenaries are all branded 'bandits' by different authors who use this term interchangeably according to the direction of their narratives.[1] In other words, any form of social behaviour could be classified as banditry if it was perceived by the state or the majority of the population as running contrary to the commonly accepted order.[2] While

[1] MacMullen 1966, 255. See the discussion in Chap. 2, where several examples are provided.

[2] Brüggemann 2012, 1028; Shaw 1993, 303.

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in antiquity an important precondition that had to be met in order for a given phenomenon to be considered as banditry concerned the size of the group of people (gang) involved in such actions, as well as the actual extent to which it challenged the state authority, in the Middle Ages such a criterion does not appear to have been applied.[3] To be sure, however common banditry may have been, there were not, in Byzantium or elsewhere in the Balkans, consistent judicial regulations that distinguished it from other forms of criminal behaviour (e.g. common robbery).[4] In reality, what distinguished banditry from ordinary, petty theft was the former's use of violence—a distinction that is also reflected in Roman and medieval legal codes.[5] In this light, banditry can be tentatively defined as a premeditated act of violence committed by groups or individuals with the intention of removing another's property or taking someone away by force. In order to fully capture the essence of the kind of banditry that will be examined in this study, it should also be pointed out that this specific type of crime was always committed in rural (rather than urban) areas, usually along local roads, highways and waterways, but also on private houses and estates.[6]

Given the working definition provided above, not all forms of crimes or acts of violence that could otherwise be classified as brigandage will be considered in this investigation. For example, the plundering of an estate or the theft of movable goods perpetrated by an invading army in the course of a military operation will remain outside the focus of this study. Besides, as has been rightly remarked, by the eleventh century, if not earlier, warfare in the Balkans had practically evolved into nothing less than large-scale brigandage, involving little direct confrontation. Plundering the enemy's territory became, instead, the dominant feature of these conflicts.[7] Indeed, primarily for logistical reasons, Balkan armies either facing

[3] Lonegran 2010, 71–72; Grünewald 2004, 41.

[4] Brüggemann 2012, 1028.

[5] Bartusis 1981, 388. For the legal definition of brigandage in the Roman Empire, see the discussion in Grünewald 2004, 14–17; Shaw 2004, 329–332; Wolff 2003, 62–63. According to Hopwood 1999, 195–196, bandits were more than an abstract category; their lives on the ground were brutal and short, and in times of stability they were something that the political cadre could be drawn together to oppose. For the legal definitions of banditry in medieval Balkan law codes, see the discussion in Chap. 6.

[6] Blumell 2007, 5. See also the definition offered by Brunk 1963, 334 in his study of the twentieth-century brigandage in Mexico.

[7] For an analysis, see Bartusis 1981, 399

foreign (usually nomadic) invaders or fighting each other relied on small-scale raiding or skirmishing and counter-raiding operations, intended to disrupt the economic life of the regions in and behind the enemy frontier or to harass and destroy enemy raiding parties.[8] In this context, the dividing line between soldier and bandit, that is, between 'state-sponsored' and 'private' banditry and raiding, was tenuous at best; for frequently, underpaid or underfed soldiers were driven to plunder and brigandage out of sheer need. Likewise, soldiers preying upon defenceless civilians outside their strict military capacity feature prominently in the sources of the period. These were men for whom service in the military represented an opportunity for personal advancement; they thus consciously crossed the thin line of legitimacy, from being soldiers to being brigands. Several known cases will be analysed in Chap. 5.

From a 'statist' perspective, then, banditry amounts to a consistent flouting of the laws of the state by groups or individuals—a parasitic type of livelihood which effectively challenged the state's monopoly of violence.[9] Nevertheless, this view was not necessarily shared by everyone. In certain areas, at the grassroots level, bandits were apparently viewed in a generally more positive light.[10] Kinsmen and/or members of their community often provided support, shelter or food to bandits, who in turn may have shared with them part of their profit. In other words, bandits were able to thrive because of the consent—a type of solidarity against outsiders—that they received at a local level.[11] Such attitudes may have well been echoed in popular tales and ballads, just as they were in folk songs from the Ottoman period, in which the brigand's life was celebrated and idealized.[12] Similar representations of bandits as the embodiment of ideal types are frequently provided by ancient *literati*. Indeed, Thomas Grünewald has argued that the Roman writers' *latro* should be regarded as a literary *topos*, a product of the imagination, characterized by invented traits appropriate to his condition. These authors chose their patterns from a repertoire according to their subjects' characteristics, and this choice was made independently of what these men actually did; they were therefore allotted—as robbers, rebels, rivals or avengers—to one of the

[8] Bartusis 1981, 398–399; Haldon 1999, 148–149.

[9] Hopwood 1999, 188–189

[10] This is certainly the case for later periods. See the detailed discussion in Sant Cassia 2006, 235ff.

[11] Sant Cassia 2006, 245; Shaw 1993, 323

[12] Gallant 1988. See also the discussion in Chap. 7.

two ideal types, comprising either 'common' bandits, exemplifying the morally bad, or 'noble' bandits, exemplifying the morally admirable.[13] The 'noble' bandit and his values, in particular, offered a stylized picture of a better world, where justice and equality prevailed and where men could rely on one another through bonds of friendship and cooperation as the only means of social contract.[14]

Quite interestingly, the highly fictitious and romanticized depictions of Roman writers correspond well with Eric Hobsbawm's well-known notion of the 'social bandit', created in his 1969 study *Bandits*.[15] This deals with bandits from agrarian societies with socio-political motivations. In effect, banditry is here considered a form of organized social protest. Social bandits are robbers of a special kind, for they are not considered simple criminals by public opinion. They are persons whom the state regards as outlaws, but who remain within the bounds of the moral order of the peasant community. Peasants see them as heroes and avengers, since they right wrongs when they defy the representatives of the state.[16] Embracing a Marxist interpretation, Hobsbawm argues that the sentiments inspired by the bandits should be seen as a yearning for a pre-political just world; they are reformers rather than revolutionaries, but can act as the initial phase in a progression towards revolution when their acts become associated with defiance against oppressive forces or when they themselves have been overcome by hope for a better future, that is, a world of equality, brotherhood and freedom.[17]

Hobsbawm claimed that his model of the social bandit—which effectively interpreted banditry as a form of class conflict—was valid for all pre-industrial peasant societies, and each time is found in one or other of its three main forms: the 'noble robber' (or 'Robin Hood'), the primitive resistance fighter (or 'hajduk') and the 'terror-bringing avenger'.[18] By far the most popular type, "the most common hero of ballad and song",[19] is

[13] Grünewald 2004, 161–163.

[14] Grünewald 2004, 7; Shaw 1993, 329–330; Lonergran 2010, 82.

[15] In this book Hobsbawm elaborates some of the main themes addressed in his earlier survey (Hobsbawm 1959).

[16] Hobsbawm 1981, 42; Blok 1972, 494.

[17] Hobsbawm 1981, 22, 27; see also Mišulin 1936. Like Mišulin, Hobsbawm, who was still embracing a vulgar form of Marxism in 1969, wanted the revolution as fast as possible. Hence the 'accelerator' of history that he uses here.

[18] Hobsbawm 1981, 20.

[19] Hobsbawm 1981, 41.

the first, the so-called noble robber. His role is that of a champion, the bringer of justice and social equality, and, as a result, his relation with the peasantry is that of total support, solidarity and identity.[20] Hobsbawm summarizes the career of the 'noble robber'—the real social bandit—in nine points: first, he begins his career of outlawry not by crime, but as the victim of injustice; second, the 'noble robber' opposes inequality; third, he provides for a redistribution of wealth by taking from the rich and giving to the poor; fourth, he never kills but in self-defence or just revenge; fifth, if he survives, he returns to his people as an honourable citizen and member of the community; sixth, he enjoys the active support of his community; seventh, he is 'invincible' except in the case of betrayal; eighth, he is, in theory at least, invisible and invulnerable; and ninth, he only challenges the authority of local gentry, clergy or other oppressors, while the king or emperor is the embodiment of justice.[21]

Even so, the members of peasant communities who are likely to become outlaws are relatively small in number. Hobsbawm identifies two main sources of free men who are forced into marginality and banditry: the rural surplus population, that is, men from agrarian environments which have relatively small labour demands or are simply too poor to employ everyone; and young men (usually unmarried) who, for one reason or the other, were not integrated into peasant society. They could include escaped serfs, ruined freemen, military men, runaways from state authorities and, generally, people with no determined place in society. Among such marginals, soldiers, deserters and veterans, but also herdsmen, played a prominent role and constituted "a natural material for banditry", a notion that has also been stressed by Brend Shaw for antiquity.[22]

In the decades following the publication of Hobsbawm's work, scholars supported, emended or refuted the social bandit model. Essentially, the debate has divided scholars into two groups—the 'essentialists' who, after Hobsbawm, viewed banditry in populist-romantic terms (banditry expresses above all a desire for a just world),[23] and the 'revisionists' who interpreted it as being politically repressive and individually interested.[24] Perhaps Hobsbawm's most outspoken critic was Anton Blok, who in his

[20] Hobsbawm 1981, 42.

[21] Hobsbawm 1981, 42–43; Lonergran 2010, 75–76.

[22] Hobsbawm 1981, 30–34; Shaw 1993, 314; Shaw 2004, 351.

[23] See for example Joseph 1990, 7–53.

[24] O'Malley 1979; White 1981; Vanderwood 1981; Driessen 1983, 96–114; Hart 1987; Koliopoulos 1987.

1972 review of *Bandits* argued that, rather than champions of the poor and avengers of social injustice, bandits often terrorized those from whose very ranks they managed to rise, and therefore helped to suppress them. What is more, instead of promoting the articulation of peasant interests within the context of the state, they tend to obstruct concerted peasant action, either directly, by putting it down through physical violence and intimidation, or indirectly, by carving out avenues of upward mobility, thus weakening class solidarity.[25] According to Blok, Hobsbawm focuses his attention on brigands and peasants themselves but fails to look at the larger society in which peasant communities are contained, especially the landed gentry and the state authorities, without which banditry cannot be fully understood; indeed, bandits very often rely for protection and support not only on members of their inner circle but also on powerful politicians or members of the nobility. To be sure, the more successful a man is as a bandit, the more extensive the protection granted him.[26] It is therefore little surprise that brigands are not instrumental in turning peasant rebellion into sustained and concerted action on a large scale. This is not, as Hobsbawm maintains, because they lack organization and ideology, but, instead, because their primary loyalty is not to the peasants or their communities, but to the established elites, who often protect and manipulate bandits in order to extend their own power domains.

Blok insists that the social bandit as conceptualized by Hobsbawm is nothing more than a figment of human imagination. But although such idealized constructs do not necessarily correspond to actual conditions, they are psychologically real, since they represent fundamental aspirations of the people. The brigands that peasants admire and glorify are men who inspire fear and respect, hence the fascination they radiate, especially among those who are in no sense respected—the peasants themselves.[27] Nevertheless, as Blok points out, people tend to idealize more easily those things with which they are least acquainted, and ignore information that, in the long run, could be detrimental to a beloved image—in this case, the bandit as a bringer of justice and equality. In reality, brigand life was, as a rule, so difficult and unpleasant that it is little wonder that many of them sought to come to terms with those in power in an attempt to improve

[25] Blok 1972, 496, 499–500.
[26] Blok 1972, 498.
[27] Blok 1972, 500–501.

their social standing. However, these conversions, much like the bandit's real life, do not provide attractive ingredients for myths and ballads.[28]

More recently, Paul Sant Cassia attempted a critique of both Hobsbawm's and Blok's approaches, arguing that banditry is in effect a statist definition of certain types of violent behaviour, not necessarily seen in the same way at the grassroots, where it may well extract consent or complicity. It is a phenomenon that takes different forms according to specific and particular conditions. To be sure, it is neither a pre-political form of peasant protest nor a means of suppressing peasant unrest. Instead, it is an aggressive form of illegality and capitalist accumulation found in certain social contexts—essentially it is a product of political economy. At the same time, the myth of banditry is not necessarily a reflection of reality, but may be employed by urban elites or peasants as a means of legitimizing political strategies.[29]

One may reasonably wonder whether the theoretical models presented above are actually applicable to the medieval Balkans. In other words, are there any known cases of Balkan brigands who were considered social bandits or rebels? Were they seen by the peasants as their champions against oppressive outside forces? Or is there any evidence that they were regarded, as Blok suggests, as individual opportunists or as the co-opted henchmen of rural elites? The truth is that the available evidence for the medieval period is so slim that it is practically impossible to put to the test any of these theories. It is certainly instructive that although Hobsbawm claims that the model of social banditry is valid for all pre-industrial societies, the earliest examples he quotes (with the exception of Robin Hood and the protagonists of Chinese popular novels) come from the sixteenth and, mainly, seventeenth centuries. Instead of leaning, then, on ambiguous—at best—evidence for the existence of social bandits in the Middle Ages, the real question that should be posed is whether, and to what extent, the social, political and economic conditions actually favoured the development of this phenomenon in the medieval Balkans.

[28] Blok 1972, 501.
[29] Sant Cassia 2006, 219, 220, 260.

Life in the Balkan Countryside and the Main Sources of Banditry (Ninth–Fifteenth Centuries)

Scholars dealing with the social environment of outlawry identify three main sources of bandits—peasants, shepherds and soldiers.[30] While pastoral communities and the army represent two natural reservoirs of rural violence (for the indigenous skills of both shepherds and soldiers could be easily transitioned into brigandage),[31] the social and economic conditions existing in peasant societies, centring around the fixed cycle of farming life which, as a rule, coincided with that of banditry, made it less likely that a peasant would turn into brigand. This is not to say that peasants, who constituted the largest segment of the population in medieval Balkan societies, did not engage in banditry. However, the main problem for researchers arises from the fact that, due to the vagueness of our sources, peasants—unlike pastoral shepherds or soldiers—are more difficult to identify as bandits. As will be shown below, from the ninth or tenth century onwards part of the Balkans, especially the wealthy agricultural plains that were under Byzantine control, witnessed an economic and demographic revival; nevertheless, a substantial number of peasants continued to live under very poor conditions. Various forms of social and political disruption, precipitated by demographic pressures and natural disasters, added to the precariousness of life and may have helped to push more men, including peasants, into brigandage.

The following section focuses on life in the Balkan countryside, in an attempt to sketch out the social and economic background out of which banditry arose. Particular emphasis will be placed on peasant and pastoral communities, as these represented the vast majority of the population and, at the same time, the two primary sources of brigandage.

The Peasantry

A great deal of archaeological and topographic research carried out over the last few decades, as well as the exemplary publication or republication of archival material, mainly from the monasteries of Mount Athos, provides us with fresh insights into a broad range of aspects of life in the countryside in the medieval Balkans during the period with which this

[30] See among others Shaw 1993, 314; Hobsbawm 1981, 31–33; Bartusis 1981, 396ff.
[31] See the discussion in Chap. 5.

study is concerned. By far, the best studied region is Macedonia, where emphasis has been placed on the social and economic aspects of rural life. The picture that now emerges is a mixed one: on the one hand, there is clear evidence of economic expansion and population growth starting from the mid-700s and culminating between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries—a radical change in perspective compared to the views expressed in older works.[32] On the other hand, there were long periods of time in which political and military events resulted in economic destruction and extreme insecurity. For the rest of the Balkans, including the Bulgarian, Serbian and Bosnian lands, there is relatively little available archaeological material, and as a result, our knowledge of peasant life is still rather sparse.[33]

As noted already, around the middle of the eighth century came to an end a long period of economic disruption in the Byzantine Balkans, which was primarily due to the absence of large-scale agricultural cultivation,[34] as well as repeated enemy invasions. These disruptions had brought about significant social and economic changes, most notably the collapse of the old urban structures that had dominated the countryside since antiquity. Thus, ancient cities and towns, both in Asia Minor and in the Balkans, had been abandoned or dwindled in size and importance, and there is clear evidence of a reduction of land use and a reversion to natural vegetation, pointing to the abandonment of cultivation and demographic collapse.[35] The decline of several towns from the seventh century onwards also meant that the village acquired a greater prominence, becoming the basis of the fiscal system, while the old rural aristocracy now derived its economic power and prestige from Constantinople and the imperial court.[36] By the ninth century the Byzantine Balkans, including its cities, had been completely transformed. The increased security in the countryside (especially from the 900s on), which was guaranteed by the omnipresence of the

[32] For a discussion, see Lefort 2002, 231–234; see also Lefort 1993, 101–113; Lemerle 1979; Harvey 1989. For research in Byzantine Macedonia, see Laiou-Thomadakis 1977; Lefort 1982; Lefort 1985.

[33] For an overview see Borisov 1989; Maksimović–Popović 2005, 329–350; Rašev–Dinčev–Borissov 2005, 351–362; Popović–Marjanović-Dušanić–Popović 2016.

[34] Practically, in the sixth century there was no peasantry in the Balkans. By contrast, it appears that large numbers of people were on the public dole; see Curta 2001, 199–217; see also Curta 2020.

[35] Curta 2013, 145–214; Lefort 2002, 269. The evidence for Macedonia is presented in Bellier *et al.* 2002, 103–104; Dunn 1992, 245–246.

[36] Laiou 2005, 31–53, here 53. For the survival of numerous cities during the Dark Ages, see Curta 2016b, 89–110; Kirilov 2006, 98.

military and the restoration of a network of fortifications, was the reason behind the population growth that appears to have persisted until the early fourteenth century.[37] These new, improved conditions in the countryside are reflected in the archaeological record of various parts of the Balkans, including Macedonia and Thrace, where villages and hamlets started growing outside their old boundaries—for instance, along the *Via Egnatia* or on the Black Sea coast. This points to a marked rise in population, and may have signalled a new type of exploitation and control of the landscape.[38] Because of the spread of cultivation, the forest in some parts of Macedonia started to recede; this in turn increased pressure on pastoral herders, who experienced considerable difficulty obtaining their grazing land, and apparently resulted, from the eleventh century on, in the systematic practice of summer pasturage.[39]

Although we know little about the peasant society and its organization for the eighth and ninth centuries, the evidence points to the existence of communities of peasant landowners who were collectively responsible for paying taxes to the state.[40] Our best source of information is the *Farmer's Law*, a Byzantine code regulating relations between farmers within a village.[41] It is dated variously from the late seventh to early eighth centuries, and may have been drawn up as a guide for judges, who would have occasionally heard disputes between peasants in villages, most likely in the Byzantine Balkans. Some scholars have suggested that it is a fairly typical piece of late Roman vulgar law, while others maintain that it was based to a considerable extent on local customs.[42] Be that as it may, the text indicates that the countryside was dominated by the free peasantry, although this is not to say that large estates did not exist at the time. The village appears to have been broken up into individual plots and each farmer owned shares of it. Besides the private plots, the village as a unit held common land for pasture and wood. Taxes were paid collectively; if someone abandoned his land, the tax due had to be paid by the others who, as a

[37] Laiou 1999, 67–77; Lefort 2002, 269.
[38] Hendy 1985, 77.
[39] Lefort 2002, 265, 270; *Actes de Lavra*, I, no. 66.
[40] Laiou-Morrisson 2007, 68; Lemerle 1979, 57; Harvey 1989, 16.
[41] For the edition and translation of the code prepared by W. Ashburner, see *Farmer's Law*.
[42] Karayannopoulos 1958, 357–373; Svoronos 1981, 487–500; Burgmann 1982, 36–39; Fine 1983, 84–93; Haldon 1997, 132–141; Kaplan 1992, 383–388.

compensation of this duty, were entitled to make use of (but not to take in ownership) the abandoned land.[43]

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the world depicted in the *Farmer's Law* largely resulted from the Slavic invasions of the sixth and seventh centuries. Indeed, Slavic tribes had extensively colonized the Balkan countryside, and, no doubt, provided much of the manpower for the population of the free villages described in the code. A fairly large body of literature, now outdated, claimed that, since the code is probably based on oral customs, it must depict native Slavic customary laws, which later received imperial recognition, as the basic rural institution in the Byzantine Empire.[44] However, as noted already, it has been convincingly argued that the *Farmer's Law* represents a relatively ancient tradition both socially and economically, and there is no evidence of any Slavic influence on it. What is more, it seems unlikely that the settlement of Slavic tribes affected the social structure of the empire to such an extent as to bring about significant administrative changes in the fiscal system.[45]

Despite the fact that the emperors of the Macedonian dynasty protected, through a total of fourteen land legislations, the structure of the village for fiscal and military reasons (the bulk of the Byzantine army consisted of free peasant smallholders who enjoyed limited fiscal privileges, in exchange for which they, or one person per household, had to give military service), during the tenth century the number of large landed properties in the empire increased decisively.[46] The process of the growth of the large estate must be sought in the land hunger of the powerful civil, ecclesiastical and military officials who, by virtue of their office as well as the economic benefits conferred by it, were in a position to exploit weaker members of society, that is, primarily the peasants.[47] It should be noted, however, that the state too, aware of the increased profitability of land, promoted the creation of vast imperial estates, especially under Basil II (976–1020), thus remaining the largest landowner throughout this period.

The transformation of the Byzantine countryside was completed by the mid-eleventh century with the systematic detachment of lands from the free peasantry and the integration of villages among the property of lay

[43] Fine 1983, 86–87.

[44] For a detailed discussion of this literature, see Górecki 2009, 337–364.

[45] Haldon 1997, 140.

[46] *Jus graecoromanum*, I, 205–214 (Trans.: 49–61); Lemerle 1979, 94–97, 108–109; Kaplan 1992, 421–426.

[47] Laiou–Morrisson 2007, 101–102.

and ecclesiastical landlords. The landowning free peasantry was slowly replaced by dependent peasants known as *paroikoi*, belonging to both the state and private landowners, as the main category of the rural population. Thus, by the beginning of the fourteenth century the Macedonian and Thracian countryside was dominated by a dense network of estates, although it is clear that a number of older rural settlements continued to exist.[48]

The crucial question that needs to be asked here is how did these changes in the Byzantine countryside—namely the shift from the village community of landowning, tax-paying farmers, to the estate, owned by the state, the Church, monasteries or lay persons, and cultivated by rent-paying *paroikoi*—affect the daily lives of the peasantry. To be sure, modern scholarship sees the rise of the estate in a generally positive light, emphasizing the economic benefits of this development; production was now organized more efficiently, as landowners had the means to provide peasants with farm-animals and agricultural implements, and carried out important land improvements such as the creation of irrigation networks.[49] Accordingly, it is thought that, overall, the peasantry profited from the expansion of wealth and the general rise in the standard of living, as this brought about an increase in its per capital income.[50] By the same token, the views of Georgije Ostrogorksi, that these transformations reduced the peasantry to serfdom and impoverishment and resulted in the economic decline of the state, are dismissed.[51] As far as we can tell, the *paroikoi* were not tied to the land, although the head of the household and his heir were obliged to cultivate the soil they held. Nevertheless, they had the right to remain on the land they cultivated after thirty years had elapsed, and eventually the rights to that land became hereditary.[52] What is more, they often seem to have benefited from the tax exemptions and immunities granted by the state to estate owners.[53] In this light, the decision of peasants to sell their land and become *paroikoi* may be seen as a reasonable one, given that

[48] Lefort 2007, 289. The evidence for northern Thrace is summarized by Borisov 2001, 77–92.

[49] Laiou–Morrisson 2007, 103–104.

[50] Laiou–Morrisson 2007, 105; Lefort 2007, 301–302.

[51] Ostrogorski 1954, 16; Ostrogorski 1956, 22.

[52] Laiou–Morrisson 2007, 106; Lefort 2007, 238–239.

[53] Oikonomides 2002, 1024–1025.

landlords could provide protection from both the risks of bad crops or famine, and the exactions of corrupt tax collectors.[54]

On the other hand, during the period in question the evidence seems to point to an increased exploitation of the peasantry, the greater part of whose production was divided between the state and the landlords.[55] The fiscal burden imposed on them was often unbearable; there are several examples, mainly from the thirteenth century, of free peasants in hiding to avoid paying taxes and of tenants fleeing their homes to avoid paying their dues.[56] A similar picture emerges from the analysis of peasant households in early fourteenth-century Macedonia, on the basis of the rich archival records of the monasteries of Mount Athos. Documents such as these provide precious insights into the conditions of the peasantry as well as the economic and demographic trends that emerge in the region. The available evidence suggests that both individual peasants and entire households were involved in a migratory movement, either towards other Macedonian estates or unknown—presumably more remote—destinations.[57] It is safe to infer that entire families mainly emigrated from areas which had particularly bad economic conditions. Indeed, the statistical data analysed by Angeliki Laiou indicates that the decline in the collective wealth of the villages is directly connected with the mobility of tenants, or, to put it another way, that the mobility of the peasantry was a result of poverty and oppression.[58]

The evidence from fourteenth-century Macedonia leaves little doubt that the movement of people was also caused by unstable political conditions and catastrophic events such as enemy invasions or internal rebellions. The fourteenth century was marked by intense political and military unrest in Macedonia, which was systematically devastated by the Catalan campaign, the civil wars of the 1320s and the 1340s, as well as the Ottoman *razzias*.[59] A similar situation prevailed in several parts of the Byzantine Balkans between the eighth and early tenth centuries, primarily as a result of the Byzantine-Bulgar confrontation, in the eleventh century during the

[54] Laiou–Morrisson 2007, 106.

[55] Laiou–Morrisson 2007, 108; Kaplan 1992, 499.

[56] Some examples are provided by Lefort 2007, 239 and n. 23.

[57] Laiou-Thomadakis 1977, 223ff. See, however, Lefort 1991, 63–89.

[58] Laiou-Thomadakis 1977, 251–255.

[59] Laiou-Thomadakis 1977, 130, 174, noting that the effects of the Catalan campaign and of the civil wars are clearly evident in a dramatic decline in the number of sheep and goats in Macedonia.

course of the 'Slavic' uprisings as well as the Hungarian and Pecheneg invasions, and in the last quarter of the twelfth century as a consequence of the Norman invasion, the Vlach-Bulgarian revolt and the rebellion of Alexios Branas.[60] For those areas most frequently affected by military activity all this meant devastation and the disruption of economic life on a regular basis. It also meant the displacement or movement of people out of their communities.[61] Peasants were often forced to move on by famine, which was commonly associated with the burden of provisioning military units on the march. Despite that fact that several military treatises urge army commanders to prevent their troops from pillaging Byzantine territory, in reality this was extremely difficult to enforce, and instead, poorly disciplined soldiers often foraged for their own fodder or supplies even on friendly soil.[62]

The picture of the Macedonian countryside that emerges for the period after the eighth century, then, is a mixed one. On the one hand, there is clear evidence of economic prosperity, which was accompanied by a notable increase in the number of rural settlements and a stable growth in population.[63] On the other, there were long periods of political and military instability, which disrupted economic activity, and brought intense hardship to a section of the peasant population. Under such conditions, it is safe to infer that brigandage would have flourished;[64] for a vibrant economy would have certainly attracted bandits, while in turbulent times, banditry would have offered an alternative source of income in the areas most heavily affected by warfare.

The social and economic conditions in the countryside of other Balkan regions are not well known. The paucity of written sources and archaeological data present a significant obstacle for historians, although the field

[60] For the Byzantine-Bulgar confrontations see Sophoulis 2012 and Hupchick 2017. For the events of the eleventh century, see the discussion in Stephenson 2000. For the revolt of Alexios Branas, see Niketas Choniates, *History*, 376–389 (Trans.: 207–214) and Cankova-Petkova 1980.

[61] See here *Acts of Panteleimon*, 365, for the displacement of population in Macedonia in the second half of the fourteenth century. The information comes from a chrysobull of Stefan Dušan.

[62] See for instance *Skirmishing*, 165; *Taktika of Leo VI*, 155–159. See also Haldon 1999, 145–147.

[63] Some evidence is provided by Babić 1988, 195–196; Georgievski 2012, 5–17.

[64] Thus, for instance, when the Catalans moved from Thrace into Macedonia, in the first decade of the thirteenth century, brigandage became endemic there; see Theodoulos Magistros, 223; Bartusis 1981, 387–388; Hobsbawm 1981, 22.

work carried out by ethnologists over the last few decades has been of particular value when investigating life in medieval village communities.[65] The best evidence comes from medieval Serbia, where both Stefan Dušan's law code (*Zakonik*) and a number of royal charters provide useful information about the overall position of the peasantry. From this material we may conclude that by the fourteenth century, if not earlier, all 'commoners' (*sebri*), whether peasants, shepherds or craftsmen, were dependent, performing labour service to either the ruler, the Church/monasteries or noblemen.[66] Even though villagers were not allowed to leave their manors, they seem to have run away in great numbers, judging by the fact that several royal charters address the issue.[67] Most of them appear to have abandoned estates that belonged to the sovereign or the nobility, mainly because the services exacted there were heavier than those performed in monastic manors (until the advent of the Ottoman threat monasteries were not required to provide soldiers to fight, although their serfs usually acted as armed guards).[68] Thus among other things, peasants were obliged to provide military service for the state, to work for at least 106 days per year for their feudal lord, to pay, in cash or kind, the Tsar's revenue or *soće*, to bear the burden of lodging and feeding the monarch, his family, members of the nobility and foreign ambassadors when they travelled through the country (the so-called *preselica*),[69] to construct or reconstruct towns and fortresses, and to serve as guards in towns and on roads in order to protect merchants and travellers from brigands.[70] Despite the fact that the relations between feudal lords and peasants were regulated by state-law (especially by articles 68 and 139 in Dušan's code), it is clear that the latter suffered constant abuse at the hands of the former, whether nobles or the Church, to the extent that they were effectively turned into rural slaves.

[65] See for example Maksimović–Popović 2005, 348–349 and fig. 8; Pleinerová 1986, 104–176.

[66] Šarkić 2013, 580.

[67] *Zakonski spomenici*, 498, 617–619. Stefan Dušan's code even refers to villages that had been deserted by their inhabitants; see *Zakonik*, 157 (article 22; Trans.: 202), 191 (article 115; Trans.: 519), 203 (article 140; Trans.: 525); Solovjev 1980, 189–190, 271, 290; Šarkić 2013, 581–583.

[68] Mihaljčić 1967, 187–193, noting that villagers frequently moved to other estates, to towns or across the border simply in order to profit from tax advantages.

[69] Blagojević 2009, 149–165, esp. 160–163.

[70] For more details see Šarkić 2013, 584–589, and below in Chap. 6.

As noted already, we are inadequately informed about peasant life and society in the Balkan interior during the Middle Ages. In Serbia, as in other parts of the region, two distinct types of rural settlements have been identified by archaeologists: those of the 'compact type', in which several houses were grouped together within a relatively small area, and those of the 'dispersed type', where the houses or collections of habitations spread out over a broader area, frequently forming separate hamlets.[71] The first type, which have been more thoroughly investigated, occurs more frequently in flat lands and along river valleys (Morava and Danube region, Kosovo, Metohija and so forth), although far enough from the watercourse itself to avoid flooding. These settlements contained various types of structures, but the sunken-floor house appears to have been the dominant form even in the later period.[72] The open space, that is, courtyard, between each cluster of buildings played a central role in the everyday lives of its inhabitants, as one could find there the bread oven, storage areas, drinking troughs for the livestock and other structures used collectively by one or more households.[73] To be sure, the fragmentary evidence from medieval documents on sales and donations of real estate to monasteries reveals the presence of communal property in parts of Serbia and Macedonia during the Late Middle Ages. Some historians subsequently associate this type of property with the *zadruga*, a term coined probably in the nineteenth century to denote a large family household, in contrast to the small, simple or nuclear family comprising only parents and children.[74] During the Ottoman period large or complex families of this kind were prevalent both in the mountainous stockbreeding zone (running throughout the mountain systems of Bosnia, Herzegovina, northern and central Macedonia and central Albania), in the narrow Adriatic littoral and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in the valleys of Serbia, western and central Bulgaria, southern Macedonia and southern Albania. However, there

[71] Popović–Marjanović-Dušanić–Popović 2016, 64–65.

[72] See for example Popović–Ivanišević 1989, 125–179. Milošević-Jevtić 2016, 117–123. In general for housing in medieval Serbia, see Milošević 1997.

[73] Popović–Marjanović-Dušanić–Popović 2016, 67.

[74] Sicard 1976, 253. For the debate between those treating *zadruga* as an institution that may have its origin in the Middle Ages or in the Early Modern Age, or, on the other hand, as a process, that is, as a set of rules operating within certain constraints that influence the rates at which persons are added to the residential groups, see the excellent discussion by Todorova 1993, 127–152, esp. 127–133. See also Filipović 1945, 60; Stahl 1986, 57–61; Hammel 1976, 100–117; Hammel 1980, 242–273.

is no direct evidence that the *zadruga* was also the dominant form of household organization in the western Balkans earlier on.

Further to the west, in the Adriatic city-states, the little information about peasant life that we possess comes from written sources. In Dubrovnik the land, which was neither sufficient nor particularly fertile, was owned by the local nobility (the *patricians*) and the Church, and only a small portion belonged to the common citizens and the peasants.[75] The status of the latter seems to have evolved over time. By the thirteenth century many free peasants worked on estates belonging to *patricians* on the obligation to render to the latter part of the produce and perform a number of duties. Although both in Dubrovnik and in other Dalmatian cities attempts were made to tie these peasants to the land they cultivated, the latter never lost their freedom, and their relations with their landlords were as a rule established through a written contract.[76]

Our knowledge of the position of the peasantry in medieval Bosnia is very limited. It is generally believed that most peasants were more or less tied to the land and, like the local pastoral communities, owed certain obligations to noble Bosnian families.[77] Overall, given that Bosnia was not a particularly fertile region, and that, additionally, the peasants were literally at the mercy of local counts who governed more or less independently from the Bosnian ruler or *ban*, it would seem reasonable to suppose that life in the countryside was extremely difficult.

The picture of life in the countryside in medieval Bulgaria is similar in many respects to that of Byzantine Macedonia, presented above. The best evidence comes from the excavations carried out in a number of rural sites (the medieval village over ancient Sevtopolis, Kovačevo, Hotnitsa, Djadovo), all of which were occupied at least until the fourteenth century.[78] A number of finds in these settlements which, much like those in late medieval Serbia, consist of both sunken-floored and ground-level dwellings, bespeak the agricultural occupation of its inhabitants, although this was complemented by animal husbandry, household crafts and beekeeping. The economic organization of these communities followed Byzantine norms (effectively, they constituted legal entities which

[75] For an overview of agrarian relations in medieval Dalmatia, see Klaić 1976, 98–119.

[76] Krekić 1972, 34–36.

[77] Fine 2007, 45.

[78] Gatev 1985 (this village was occupied from the early eleventh to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century); Čangova 1972; Aleksiev 2004; Borisov 1989.

administered their own hinterland). However, by the eleventh century many villages were integrated into the property of large lay and ecclesiastical landlords. The landowning free peasants were thus subdivided into different categories according to the means of production at their disposal, even though they maintained, in theory at least, their communal rights.[79]

In this context, the evidence that now emerges points to the economic prosperity of rural areas from the late tenth century onwards. That prosperity, which ultimately had its roots in the relative peace and stability brought by Byzantine rule and continued during the reign of Bulgarian rulers in the early and mid-1200s, is best illustrated by the presence of a substantial number of coin finds—a fact that seems to suggest a trend towards a bigger market involvement of the countryside.[80] That the rural population was engaged in regional trade is confirmed by the discovery in several sites of different types of jewellery (rings, earrings, glass bracelets) and glazed tableware, which were not only acquired from outside but, as the eight kilns from Hotnitsa demonstrate, also produced locally.[81]

In this light it is clear that the peasants' existence in large parts of rural Bulgaria went beyond the line of simply securing their survival. As long as peace and stability prevailed in the region, both the countryside and the urban centres prospered.[82] However, the period between the early ninth and mid-fourteenth centuries also witnessed long patches of political upheaval, which severely affected the livelihood of peasants.[83] Thus, the sites at Kovačevo and Djadovo were abandoned during the passage of the

[79] Cankova-Petkova 1964, 36–37; Novaković 1965, 144; see also Biliarsky 2010; Laskaris 1930, 63–65. For an overview, see Murdzhev 2008, 82–97.

[80] See for instance Penčev 1984, 137–159, for the 800 specimens found in the village on the top of Sevtopolis.

[81] Murdzhev 2008, 77–80.

[82] Hendy 1983, 179–191; Curta 2006, 320–322; Mikulčiḱ 1996, for numerous examples of the gradual transformation of 'rural' fortresses that into small towns.

[83] For instance, the Byzantine-Bulgar wars of the ninth and tenth centuries, the Pecheneg invasions in the eleventh century, the passage of the Crusader armies and the revolt of Peter and Asen in the 1180s and 90s, the Mongol and Tatar attacks in the thirteenth century, as well as the Serbo-Bulgarian conflicts and the Ottoman advance in the mid and late 1400s; see Sophoulis 2012 and Hupchick 2017 for the wars with Byzantium. See the discussion in Stephenson 2000, 89–100 and 218–222 for the Pecheneg invasions and the passage of the Crusading armies through Thrace. For the latter, see also Gagova 2004. For the revolt of Peter and Asen, see Madgearu 2017. For the Tatar attacks the best survey is offered by Vásáry 2005. See also Pavlov–Atanasov 1994, discussing the Mongol invasion of 1241–1242. For a general outline of the Sebo-Bulgarian conflicts and the Ottoman conquest of Bulgaria, see Božilov–Gjuzelev 1999, 568–581, 626–627, 647–661.

armies of the Third Crusade through Thrace, the village over ancient Sevtopolis was destroyed by fire during the Byzantine civil war of 1341–1347, while Hotnitsa did not survive the Ottoman onslaught in the 1390s.[84] It was precisely during such turbulent times, marked by the striking decline in living conditions in the countryside, when banditry became an attractive option for destitute peasants.

The Pastoral World

Undoubtedly, herders formed a natural—and indeed the most common—source of bandits in the Middle Ages. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, shepherds, through their experience of pastoral life, had acquired a set of skills that could easily be put to military use should the need arise. Their flocks and pastures required constant care and protection, and this could only be achieved through the use of arms. Raiding neighbours—either pastoralists or peasants—for livestock or agricultural goods was not uncommon, and this had the effect of making herders skilled in planning and executing small-scale military activities. What is more, the generally hostile environment in which they lived demanded physical strength, endurance and a great tolerance for hardship. Overall, the pastoral way of life encouraged aggression and a willingness to resort to violence, as well as a great concern for personal courage and status—a set of values characteristic of these societies.

Another reason why shepherds resorted so frequently to banditry was the various forms of pressures exerted on them by agricultural societies, most notably the pressures on land. The evidence seems to suggest that from the ninth or tenth century onwards, when there are clear signs of population growth and a subsequent expansion of agricultural settlements outside their old boundaries, herders found it increasingly difficult to gain access to large tracts of lowland pasture.[85] This seems to have resulted in the systematic practice of long-distance transhumance, which is clearly evident in the Balkans from the eleventh century, and at the same time may have encouraged shepherds to enter into subsidiary occupations such as brigandage.[86]

[84] Čangova 1972, 26; Borisov 1989, 14; Murdzhev 2008, 71, 73.

[85] Lefort 2007, 265.

[86] Harvey 1989, 156–157 and n. 179; Lewthwaite 1981; Halstead 1987; Chang 1993, 699; Chang 1997, 251–254.

Concerning the socio-economic organization of pastoral communities, the information available to us is relatively sparse. As far as we can tell, Balkan herders engaged in both types of pastoral production: settled year-round agro-pastoralism, that is, a form of social organization based on the growing of crops (wheat, barley, viticulture, orchards) and the raising of livestock (usually relatively small flocks of sheep and goats); and transhumant pastoralism, in other words, the long-distance movement between two fixed residencies—the high mountains in the summer and the lowland plains in the winter. In both Byzantine and Slav sources, transhumance (but also brigandage) was particularly associated with the pastoral population of Vlachs, a term that much later seems to have taken an occupational meaning as well (sheep/horse breeders).[87] According to Kekaumenos, some Vlach communities spend the summer (roughly from April to October) in the "mountains of Bulgaria" and the winter in the plain of Thessaly. They migrated with their families and flocks, and lived in seasonal camps called *katuni* (camps).[88] Other Vlachs, probably less well-off, appear to have been employed by estate owners.[89] The adoption of transhumance as a pastoral strategy was connected to a set of social norms that were absolutely necessary for the herder's survival, given that he had to operate in two distinct social settings—the closed world of the upland village and the larger world of the sprawling agricultural villages and towns. Indeed, the dual membership into summer and winter residencies involved a necessary cohesive structure that was best expressed and

[87] See for example *Alexiad*, 242: [….] τὸν νομάδα βίον εἵλοντο (Βλάχους τούτους ἡ κοινὴ καλεῖν οἶδε διάλεκτος) [….]. Fine 2006, 129, claims that the 'professional' meaning of the word is a medieval phenomenon, and quotes Dušan's law code, which separates Slav agriculturalists from Vlach pastoralists, since their differing lifestyles required different tax policies. See also Novaković 1912, 809–810. For the opposite view, see Mirdita 1995; Curta 2016a, 427–462.

[88] Kekaumenos, *Strategikon*, 210; Gyóni 1951, 29–42. Moreover, John Apokaukos, 427, no. 27, talks about the seasonal migration of the herders of Vegenetia, in western Greece (Amvrakia) in the thirteenth century. Apart from the seasonal camp, the *katun* designated a form of organization of transhumant shepherding, that is, a group of people from several households gathered around a senior member. The word is obviously a variant of the Romanian word *cătun*, which means 'hamlet'; see Banović 2016, 42–43; Filipović 1963, 45–112; see also Beldiceanu—Beldiceanu-Steinherr—Năsturel 1988, 168, for Ottoman registers applying the term *katun* to Vlach and Albanian pastoral communities in Greece. For information describing Albanians as transhumant nomads, see Isidore of Kiev, *Panegyric*, 194.

[89] See for example *Actes de Lavra*, I, no. 66; Lefort 2007, 265; see also Agorelitsas 2016, 70–71; Dasoulas 2005–2014, 13–14. Evidence pointing in the same direction comes from medieval Serbia: see *Zakonski spomenici*, 622–631, 661–667.

sustained through social ties.[90] Thus, the creation of bonds of kinship (through marriage, god-parenthood or blood-brotherhood) and clientage with members of lowland communities was essentially the only way transhumant pastoralists could gain access to winter grazing grounds, agricultural products and merchants or intermediaries, to which they could sell cheese, milk, meat, skin and wool. In turn, transhumants usually protected lowland communities from outside attacks, often by other herders, and sometimes even from oppression by corrupt state officials and tax collectors.[91] Typically, these ties formed the backbone of the 'bandit networks', that is, all those sheltering and protecting bandits, providing them with all sorts of information, and helping them dispose of stolen goods.[92]

The Soldiery

Much like herders, soldiers were trained for a lifetime in the profession of arms, and thus, since antiquity, were naturally seen as potential brigands.[93] To be sure, the evidence from medieval sources makes it abundantly clear that Balkan soldiers, acting outside their strict military capacity, engaged very frequently in banditry. Several possible reasons for this can be suggested. The first is connected with the generally poor conditions of service in Balkan armies during the period in question. While in campaign, regular troops, and in some cases even select forces, were often ill-equipped and ill-provisioned, a fact that contributed to the growth of indiscipline and low morale, but also of a sense of separation between the soldier and his government.[94] The problem of delayed pay, especially of mercenaries who from the eleventh century became a common phenomenon in Byzantium and in the fourteenth century formed the bulk of Serbia's military forces, was another primary cause of soldiers' discontent.[95] Under

[90] Chang 1993, 695–696.

[91] Dasoulas 2005–2014, 15; Kaser 2000, 97–117.

[92] For the 'bandit network' see Chap. 5.

[93] Shaw 1993, 314.

[94] For some good examples of this, see Bartusis 1981, 399–401. See also the discussion in Haldon 1999, 261–262; Bartusis 1992, 213ff. For the eighth and ninth centuries, see Kaegi 1981.

[95] Bartusis 1992, 139–150, stressing the difficulty of the Byzantine state to raise sufficient resources to finance its army. The most obvious solution to this problem, although by no means the only one, was to increase taxes. For mercenaries employed in Serbia, see Popović–Marjanović-Dušanić–Popović 2016, 97–102.

these circumstances, some of these men are very likely to have turned to crime as a means of subsistence.[96]

The—seemingly—limited opportunities offered to soldiers after active service may have been another contributory factor. In the Byzantine Empire, and presumably in other Balkan states, upon retirement soldiers received no state benefits other than their protected fiscal status. Most ordinary soldiers in the field armies in the provinces would have subsequently retired to their landed property (from which their military duties had been supported) without receiving any form of compensation or pension.[97] Thus, while many soldiers would have certainly fared well or even thrived as farmers, there is evidence for the impoverishment of substantial numbers.[98] Under these circumstances, banditry seemed to provide more reasonable career prospects.

[96] See for example Bartusis 1981, 396.

[97] In Byzantium provincial or *thematic* troops served on a seasonal basis at their own or their family's expense, providing, for instance, the soldier's gear and provisions. In exchange, the soldier or his immediate dependents received certain fiscal privileges; Haldon 1979, 48–51, 74ff; Haldon 1999, 263; Rautman 2006, 228–229.

[98] Haldon 1999, 263–264.

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CHAPTER 4

Land, Roads, Trade and Money: Balkan Banditry in Its Geographical and Economic Context

Physical Context and Roads

With few exceptions, scholars agree that banditry is a predominantly rural phenomenon. Balkan bandits infested roads and rivers both in the highlands and in the lowlands, especially in peripheral and frontier regions which rarely remained under firm state control. To be sure, very few areas in the Balkans remained free of brigand depredations during the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, certain regions were more prone to such activity than others. In the western Balkans, brigandage flourished along the 'caravan routes' which connected the Adriatic Sea with the interior of the peninsula, while in the eastern Balkans, particularly in parts of Macedonia, rural lawlessness appears to have become exceptionally common from the ninth century onwards. Although very diverse in terms of their relief and geological structure (the terrain of the western and central Balkans is far more mountainous and rugged than that of Macedonia), both areas share a common feature—they are mostly covered by thick forest and woodland, whose existence constitutes an almost necessary precondition for the development of banditry. Indeed, banditry was committed in the forest or from the forest because many roads run through the forest, and it was from there that one could ambush and attack travellers; at the same time,

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the forest was the first place of refuge, for staying in the woods offered an excellent opportunity to evade state authorities.[1]

Several accounts, mostly related to the passage of Crusading armies through the Balkans, provide interesting descriptions of the physical landscape along the main northwest-to-southeast axis connecting the Adriatic coast with Thrace and Constantinople.[2] From them it becomes clear that much of the interior, including the part stretching from eastern Dalmatia to Niš (Fig. 4.1), was under forest (frequently very dense, consisting largely of oak and conifers),[3] was sparsely populated and overall difficult to cross, mainly because most of the local roads were or had become little more than paths or tracks, easily blocked by human agency or the weather. Thus, a number of western sources relate how the German knights of the

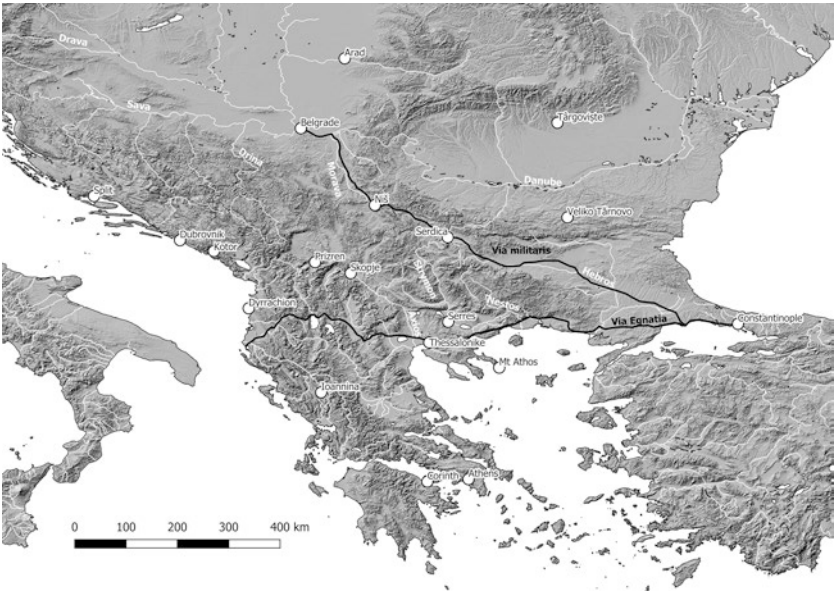

Fig. 4.1 The Balkans

[1] Reuter 2006, 53–54.
[2] For a detailed discussion, see Hendy 1985, 36–39; see also Dall'Aglio 2010, 403–416.
[3] Lefort 2007, 261.

Third Crusade, after reaching Braničevo (Brandiez) through woodland, entered the extremely dense 'Bulgarian forest' and would spend almost a whole week travelling through its airless atmosphere, seldom seeing the sun through the unbroken canopy.[4] Part of that same region, around Niš, was known to Byzantine writers as *dendra* (trees/forest), suggesting its wild and inaccessible nature.[5] Furthermore, in her account of Alexios I's campaigns in the Balkans, Anna Komnena reports that Zygum, the area separating Dalmatia from the imperial territories in Kosovo, was so thickly forested and full of ravines as to be virtually impassable.[6] The hinterland of the Adriatic coast, in what is today Dalmatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and northeastern Albania, has been described in a very similar way—thickly forested territories with bad roads and very few cultivated areas.[7] In the eastern Balkans, particularly in the area stretching from Serdica down to the northern edges of the Thracian plain, the landscape was more diverse. The lowlands and hills were mostly covered with low vegetation, whereas the higher altitudes—the mountain country of the Haimos and Rila-Rhodope ranges—were shrouded in dense forest (mainly coniferous trees).[8] In the Thracian and Macedonian plains, population, cultivation and urban concentrations became much more abundant while Mount Athos, an area plagued by banditry from the eleventh century onwards, is dominated by the rugged and thickly forested terrain which rises steeply to reach a height of over 2000 metres.[9]

Most of the aforementioned regions were traversed by a network of regional and local roads which provided essential links between urban settlements, thereby facilitating trade and the spread of central authority within the Balkan states. The main arterial routes as well as numerous secondary roads that flowed into the main communication system were built by the Romans, although it is not clear how regularly they were maintained during the Middle Ages, so it is possible that by the ninth

[4] Ansbert, *Historia de expeditione*, 25–28 (Trans. 59–60); Odo of Deuil, *De profectione*, 30–32; Popović–Marjanović-Dušanić–Popović 2016, 207.

[5] John Kinnamos, *History*, 204 (Trans.: 155); Radojčić 1970, 249–260; Stephenson 2000, 267.

[6] *Alexiad*, 258.

[7] Hendy 1985, 39. For an overview of the evidence, see Fejić 1995, 115–126.

[8] Mavrommati 2012, 103.

[9] Hendy 1985, 38.

century much of this network had gradually decayed.[10] This was certainly the case even with major long-distance roads. Among them, the best known was the *Via Egnatia*, which ran west-east across the southern Balkans, providing communications between Dyrrachion on the Adriatic coast and Constantinople. Although large sections of this ancient road were frequently in such a state of disrepair that travellers could barely pass along it, the *Via Egnatia* was still, in the late Middle Ages, the preferred route for armies on campaign, diplomats, traders and pilgrims alike.[11] A number of other routes connected the Adriatic coast, especially the area around Dubrovnik (Ragusa), Bar (Antivari) and Ulcinj, with the most important regions and towns of Serbia and Bosnia, ultimately enabling travellers to reach Constantinople. Among them the most important was the so-called *Via Drine* ('Drinski' or 'Bosanski' road), a particularly busy route leading from Dubrovnik to Niš. From the coast this road led northwest to Trebinje, Bileća and then, through very dense forests, it headed to Cernica (the trip along the 'Trebinje' road was considered to be the extremely dangerous, since it features prominently in robbery reports). It then led through the gorge of Sutjeska to the River Drina, along the banks of which were situated a number of forts and commercial stations, including Foča. From there it continued to Goražde, where it took a southeastern turn until it reached Pljevlja and Prijepolje on the Lim River. Following one day's walk, the road led to Sjenica, where it joined another route coming from northeastern Bosnia. The road was separated again at Raška, just beyond Novi Pazar. It then followed the Ibar River valley, crossed the mining district of Mount Kopaonik (Argentario), finally arriving in Niš where it intersected the *Via Militaris*, the main military highway linking Belgrade with Constantinople.[12]

A second arterial route, the *Via Neretva* ('Neretvanski' road), led from the coast through the Neretva valley and the Dinaric Alps to the Bosnian heartland. From Ston, at the gates of the Pelješac peninsula, this road ran northeast to Blagaj, near Mostar and Konjić; it then went across Ivan Mountain and reached Visoko and Vrhbosna, present-day Sarajevo, where

[10] For an overview of the ancient road network in the western Balkans, see Petrović 2013, 235–287. For the decay of public roads in the Byzantine Empire, see the discussion in Haldon 1999, 51–54. See also Filiposki 2009, 110–119; Filiposki 2017, 113–130.

[11] Dimitroukas 1997, 341–356; Obolensky 1971, 22–23; Oikonomides 1996; Fasolo 2003.

[12] From Belgrade another road led across the Danube to Hungary. For a detailed description of the *Via Drine*, see Škrivanić 1974, 43–50; Carter 1972, 140–141; Kovačević 1961, 159; Kurtović 2014, 261–263; Pinelli 2015, 189–190.

the road branched off into three arteries, one of which joined the *Via Drine* at Goražde. The main route continued to Olovo, where it was once again divided into three sections, one moving northwards towards Tuzla, another one following a northeastern direction to Zvornik and thence Belgrade, and a third turning east to reach Srebrenica and the mining district at Mount Rudnik. From there it was possible to arrive at Niš, although this route seems to have been little more than a minor path or track unsuitable for any wheeled vehicles.[13]

Particularly important were the roads that connected the Adriatic coast south of Dubrovnik with the interior. Among them, the best known was the *Via de Zenta* ('Zetski' road). Starting from Bar (or alternatively Ulcinj) it followed the course of the Bojana River until Sveti Srgj (now Obot) and then Shkodër. It then ran along the Drin valley, crossing mountainous terrain covered with forest, to Scutari and Prizren. It proceeded to Pristina, turned off south to Janjevo and continued from there down to Novo Brdo (by an alternative northeasterly loop, it was possible to reach Niš) and Skopje, where one could either follow the course of the Vardar/Axios River to Thessaloniki (from Skopje various branch roads enabled travellers to bypass the Axios gorge, riding southwest to Vitola or east through Štip and Strumica), or move eastward to join the *Via Militaris* near Pazardžik. Several other roads led from the area around Bar to the hinterland. One of them could be taken up to Trebinje, where it met the *Via Drine*. Another led to Kotor and Cetinje, then northwest to the mine and trading centre of Brskovo before turning off to the north towards Peć, Vučitrn and on to Pristina, where it connected with the *Via de Zenta*.[14]

With respect to the system of communications in the eastern Balkans, special mention must be made of the *Via Militaris*, which from Constantinople ran northwest across Thrace to Adrianople, and thence along the Hebros via Philippoupolis; it then led through the 'Gates of Trajan' to Serdica, where it connected with other Balkan land routes leading to the South Danube plain and the Black Sea.[15] Another arterial route proceeded along the Black Sea coast to Anchialos, Mesembria and Odessos (Varna), and then up to the mouth of the Danube. At Anchialos, one

[13] Škrivanić 1974, 53–59; Kovačević 1961, 159; Carter 1972, 141; Kurtović 2014, 264–265; Pinelli 2015, 191–192.

[14] Škrivanić 1974, 62–71; Carter 1971, 141–142; Avramea 2002, 66; Kurtović 2014, 263–264; Pinelli 2015, 192.

[15] Soustal 1991, 132–135; Avramea 2002, 65–66; Obolensky 1971, 17; Belke 2002, 74 n. 3, 87–90; Jireček 1877; Simeonova 2006, 103; see also Marinow 11–24.

could take the main road connecting the Black Sea with Serdica and follow it to Aetos (in the eastern Haimos, some 30 km northwest of Burgas) where another across the River Luda Kamčija (Tiča) led to Pliska and Preslav, the first Bulgar capitals.[16] Finally an important road had its starting point at Serdica, where it intersected with the *Via Militaris*. It then followed the Strymon valley through the *kleisoura* of Roupel to Serres before joining the *Via Egnatia* near Amphipolis.[17]

North of the Lower Danube, in the Romanian lands, a number of roads and tracks led from Wallachia to Transylvania and thence into the Hungarian plain. Most of these roads closely followed the valleys of Wallachian rivers, most notably the Olt, Jiu, Dâmboviţa and Ialomiţa. During the late medieval period, they became particularly important routes of regional and local exchange, as both traders and craftsmen had an uninterrupted presence there.[18] Likewise, in Moldavia a number of roads, following the course of the Siret and Prut Rivers, connected the eastern Carpathians with the Lower Danube region, providing links between local centres of power and trade.[19]

In this context, two additional comments are in order. First, apart from the main arterial routes discussed above, numerous local roads existed in the interior, connecting settlements, markets and mines far from the main communication system. Although the majority of these routes were often mere tracks or paths unsuitable for carriage transport, it is clear that they were heavily used, meeting the needs of the local population in everyday life.[20] Second, the gradual dilapidation of the Balkan road network reflected the quality and safety of both human travel and the transportation of commodities. One result, for instance, was an increasing reliance upon beasts of burden for the movement of people and goods rather than on wheeled vehicles drawn by draught animals. By the eighth and ninth centuries, therefore, caravan transport, which was better suited to roads of poor quality, had become the predominant form of traffic across the

[16] Soustal 1991, 144–146; Avramea 2002, 67; Wendel 2005, 225–229, 242–254.

[17] Avramea 2002, 67; Wendel 2005, 153–159; Simeonova 2006, 102–105.

[18] Rădvan 2010, 136. For a recent survey on roads and their maintenance in late medieval Transylvania, see Toda 2013.

[19] Giurescu 1997, 32, 58–60.

[20] For the extremely dense network of secondary roads that existed in Macedonia (Mount Athos, Chalkidike peninsula, Thessaloniki and its hinterland, as well as the lower Strymon valley), some of which were paved, see the evidence from the archives of Mount Athos as summarized by Belke 2002, 86–89 with further bibliography.

Balkans, although the major highways, most notably the *Via Militaris* and sections of the *Via Egnatia*, remained suitable for carriage transport, albeit with great difficulty, until the late Middle Ages.[21]

Travelling Through the Medieval Balkans

From approximately the beginning of the tenth century, both the eastern and western part of the Balkans experienced a substantial growth in travel. This was due to a number of reasons. Principal amongst these was the rapid expansion of trade, which was coincidental with, and partly fuelled by, the growth of the regional economies. To be sure, the general political and economic conditions were now very different from those prevalent in the region during the previous centuries. During the reign of the Macedonian emperors almost the entire Balkan peninsula came under Byzantine rule. Apart from increasing the human and natural resources of the empire, the pacification of the Balkans meant that roads were now open, as were communications at sea once Crete was re-conquered by the Arabs in 961, while urban centres were connected to their agricultural hinterland.[22] Somewhat later, from roughly the early twelfth century, the western Balkans too underwent profound political and economic changes. The Byzantine grip on the Dalmatian coast and its hinterland was loosened, and Venice was gradually able to establish her economic dominance over the Adriatic sea lanes.[23] At the same time, local Slavic chieftains, former vassals of the emperor, started forming their own independent polities, in Serbia and Bosnia, thereby marking the subsequent history of the region.[24]

The consolidation of Byzantine rule in the greatest part of the peninsula, which created conditions of relative security in the region, coupled with Venice's increasing search for commodities (mainly foodstuffs) from coastal communities in the eastern Adriatic, that is Dalmatia and Albania, led to a more intensive use of land and sea communications from the eleventh century, if not earlier.[25] In other words, more people were now on

[21] McCormick 2001, 76, 402; Petrović 2013, 284; Belke 2002, 77–81, with several examples for the use of carts along the *Via Militaris*.

[22] Stephenson 2000, 62–79; Laiou 2002, 17–18.

[23] For a discussion, see Nicol 1988.

[24] For an overview of these events, see Stephenson 2000; Fine 1987.

[25] Venice's search for commodities throughout the Adriatic was generated by the fact that, as its population was steadily expanding, its immediate surroundings were no longer able to adequately satisfy the city's demands for goods; see Lane 1973, 18; Dorin 2012, 242.

the move. Apart from merchants, they included various state officials,[26] among them tax collectors,[27] couriers,[28] emissaries,[29] church officials,[30] monks and 'holy men',[31] pilgrims,[32] missionaries,[33] artisans[34] and displaced civilians,[35] as well as ordinary people going about their everyday business.

But what of the experience of travelling in the Balkans from the ninth century onwards? To be sure, travel by land in the Middle Ages entailed a number of serious challenges, especially for those having to cover long distances to reach their destination. The first concerned the weather. This

[26] As was the case with the *kritai* (professional judges) who travelled in Byzantine Macedonia in the tenth and eleventh centuries; Morris 2013, 235–245.

[27] See for example Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, I, 205 for the tax collectors dispatched in the countryside in 1301. In the fourteenth century, especially in eastern Macedonia, their authority frequently expanded over a broad territory; for some examples, see Maksimović 1988, 219ff.

[28] Who could either be private or public employees; see especially Krekić 1952, 113–120; Dimitroukas 1998, 24–27. For various complaints of Byzantine authors, most notably Eustathios of Thessaloniki, regarding the efficiency of couriers, see Evaggelatou-Notara 1990, 311–317; Hunger 1978, I, 229–230.

[29] There are numerous examples in the sources. One of the best known is the Byzantine delegation, led by Theodore Metochites, to Stefan Milutin at Skopje in 1299; Theodore Metochites, *Presbeutikos*, 89–119, esp. 90–94. Another well-known embassy is that under Nikephoros Gregoras to the Serbian court early in 1327 for the safe return of Eirene, daughter of Theodore Metochites and widow of John Palaiologos, who had died at Skopje; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, I, 374–383; Nikeph. Gregoras, *Letters*, II, 103–115, no. 32a and 115–124, no. 32b. For Venetian delegations to Serbia, see *Listine*, I, 162, 167; III, 115–117, 262. See also McCormick 2001, 175–181 and 557–561 for some other examples.

[30] Such as Matthew Gavalas, bishop of Ephesos, who in a letter dated to June 1332 describes his adventurous trip to the city of Vrysis in Thrace: Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 192–201, no. 64.

[31] Several examples are presented in Sophoulis 2016.

[32] Among them, St Gregory of Decapolis, who around the 830s decided to travel from Ephesos to Rome via the Balkans; *Life of Gregory the Decapolite*, 86–88; Dimitroukas 1997, 350–351; McCormick 2001, 198–203.

[33] Cyril and Methodios may well have travelled to Great Moravia across the Balkans; see McCormick 2001, 181–197. Some twenty years later, Basil I sent a group of missionaries to the Adriatic hinterland to convert the Croats and Serbs; *Life of Basil* (in *Theophanes continuatus*), 194–197.

[34] Some examples, including that of a certain *Nicoletus intalliator de Veneciis*, who promised to offer his services to the *ban* of Bosnia in 1341, are mentioned by *Div. canc.* XIII, 59; Krekić 1978b, 417.

[35] For the displacement of the (mainly agrarian) population into Macedonia in the fourteenth century, see the Serbian chrysobull of Stephen Dušan: *Acts of Panteleimon*, 365; see also Laiou-Thomadakis 1977, 128–130; Charanis 1972, 127.

obviously formed a major problem in wintertime when the mountains were covered with snow, rivers were flooded at times of heavy rain, and icy winds blew from the north.[36] In addition, bridges were often destroyed by flooding, earthquakes or the effects of warfare, further impeding travel and endangering travellers' lives. What is more, several roads ran through swampy ground, and thus were impossible to use during the spring and winter.[37]

While the main Balkan land routes were open to traffic during much of the period between the ninth and twelfth centuries, when peace and stability prevailed over most of the peninsula, they were still very vulnerable in times of war. Indeed, war, along with brigandage, constituted the greatest threat to travellers, who, if unfortunate enough, could be led into captivity or death.[38] Taking guides, to make sure that the route followed was secure or simply to speak the language of the host country in order to better communicate with the local population, was therefore essential, although the situation certainly varied depending on where one was travelling.[39] Overall, it seems that in the case of long-distance travel, few if any travelled alone. Embassies and trading caravans tended to be big, approaching several dozen in some instances, as in the case of Gregoras' delegation to the Serbian court in 1327.[40] Nevertheless, there can be no doubt—in fact, several examples are known from the sources—that for shorter (i.e. local) trips, many preferred to travel unescorted, thereby increasing the risk of being attacked on the way.

As noted already, although by the ninth century caravan transport had become the main means of traffic between the Adriatic and the Balkan interior, some travellers, especially along the two major highways, the *Via Militaris* and the *Via Egnatia*, continued to rely on wheeled vehicles drawn by animals for the movement of goods and, in some instances,

[36] For the flooding of rivers and how that impeded communications in the Balkans, see *Scriptor incertus*, 44. For the icy northern winds, Theodore Metochites, *Presbeutikos*, 94.

[37] This, for example, was the case with a number of roads along the Hebros River; see Jireček 1877, 36.

[38] Thus, we hear of a Byzantine official by the name of Zacharias, who around 815/16 was sent on official duty in Thrace, where he was captured by the Bulgars and taken off to the *khanate*; *Life of Niketas of Medikion*, xxxi.

[39] Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 192; Belke 2002, 85–86. See also Naitana 1999, 41–75, at 69, for the recommendation made to Antonio de' Medici, heading east by land, not to venture into those areas without having found someone from Ragusa to act as a guide.

[40] Which consisted of 70 individuals; Nikeph. Gregoras, *Letters*, 108, no. 32a; McCormick 2001, 402.

people. This was certainly the case with some of the Crusading armies marching through Hungary, as well as with the 'army' of Peter the Hermit before them, but there is also evidence pointing to the use of carts on secondary roads, on plains and in less hilly terrain, such as the Morava valley or Kosovo.[41] Nevertheless, the difficulties and hazards associated with the use of wheeled vehicles (e.g. the narrow, swampy or rugged roads that slowed down the pace of travel, thereby increasing vulnerability to harassment from bandits) evidently weighed heavily on the minds of medieval travellers, who most of the time preferred to rely on pack animals instead.

An important aspect of travel involved the availability of resting houses along the way. In the Balkans the evidence suggests that several such places existed on the main routes, for instance, in the eastern section of the *Via Egnatia*, at Rhegion, Selymbria and Rhaidestos, or further west, close to the Strymon Delta, at Marmarin and Sravikion, to mention but a few.[42] Undoubtedly, similar establishments, whether private or public, could also be found along the *Via Militaris*. However, various types of lodgings also awaited travellers on numerous secondary roads. We hear from Nikephoros Gregoras, for example, that the members of the Byzantine delegation to Serbia found several hostels in an unnamed town not far away from Strumica, while private lodgings and inns were also available in various locations in Thrace and Mount Athos.[43] In the western Balkans, resting places existed along many of the roads that connected the Adriatic coast with its hinterland. On the *Via Drine*, indoor accommodation could be found, among other places, at Foča and Prijepolje, and on the *Via Neretva* at Konjič.[44] On the other hand, it seems that further inland, towards Niš and Sofia, few if any hostels existed. Those who had the means are thus likely to have carried tents, although most travellers were left with no choice but to sleep in the open air.

[41] For carts in the Crusading armies, see Odo of Deuil, *De profectione*, 24–25, and Belke 2002, 79–81, with more examples. For the Balkan interior, see Škrivanić 1974, 14–17.

[42] Laiou 2012, 133.

[43] Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, I, 379; *Life of Athanasios the Athonite*, 151–152; Karpozilos 1993, 535–536.

[44] Pinelli 2015, 191; Kurtović 2014, 383.

Trading Networks in the Medieval Balkans

As already noted, the period between the tenth and early fourteenth centuries witnessed a significant growth in the volume of Balkan trade in both the eastern and western parts of the peninsula. There were several reasons for this development. To begin with, the establishment of Byzantine rule over most of the Balkans in the eleventh century doubtless played a role in the evident economic and demographic growth of the entire region. This, in turn, resulted in a gradual growth and multiplication of cities, whose character was slowly changing from defensive and administrative outposts to centres of production and trade but also to centres of demand. Second, from the twelfth century onwards, Italian city-states, most notably, Venice, Genoa and, later, Florence, rapidly expanded their trading activity in the Balkans, and by taking control of the sea lanes were gradually able to establish their economic dominance over local markets. This, as has been rightly pointed out, organized, to a considerable extent, the activities of the Balkan population both in land and in sea trade by tying them to the needs of Italian merchants.[45] This trading system seems to have left local trade in the hands of an emerging Balkan merchant class, which actively interacted with foreign traders and ran the network of everyday local economic activity—a fact that contributed further to the economic development of the entire region.[46]

Subsequently, overland trade routes through the Balkans were revived, leading to an expansion of regional commercial activity. In effect, Balkan trade became part of the eastern Mediterranean trade system, so that the commodities and profits from the long-distance exchange networks were fed into the regional trade system, and vice versa. Products of the hinterland thus found their way to the Adriatic and Black Sea coasts to circulate among the local ports and to be exported to Italy, Constantinople or even further.[47] At the same time, large cities in Italy or the Levant offered luxury and manufactured goods that would have been unavailable in inland communities.

Within this context, overland and, to a lesser extent, river routes became important conduits of exchange between the Balkan coasts and the interior. The main roads were frequented by merchants, among whom the

[45] Laiou 1985, 147.
[46] See for example Murzhev 2008, 237–238; Laiou 1985, 142–143.
[47] Laiou 1985, 145.

Ragusans played a major role. They were mainly active in the trading routes connecting the Adriatic coast with the Dalmatian, Serbian and Bosnian hinterlands, acting as intermediaries between local producers or suppliers and Venetian merchants.[48] Their presence along the *Via de Zenta*, the Morava-Axios route and the *Via Egnatia* is well documented.[49] There is also evidence for their presence as far east as Bulgaria, which they reached by using the roads that led from Dubrovnik to Niš and thence to Tărnovo, Vidin or the Black Sea coast.[50]

Venetian merchants had also established a significant presence along the overland trading routes of the Balkans, although it is clear that they were generally reluctant to travel personally into the hinterland and thus conducted business mostly through Dubrovnik. Still, we find them present in the interior as early as the 1270s.[51] In the following centuries they were active in Serbia, Bosnia, Bulgaria and the Byzantine provinces, including Thessaloniki and a number of towns in western Macedonia (Ohrid, Prilep, Kastoria, Moglena, Skopje, Strumica etc.), where they were granted trading privileges by the emperor in 1199.[52]

Despite the fact that much of this commercial activity was organized and controlled by Ragusan and Venetian merchants, there is no doubt that the local Slav, Vlach and, further east, Greek population also played a part in it. Thus, Vlach, Serbian and Bosnian traders are known to have transported goods from the Adriatic coast to its hinterland, and vice versa.[53] Likewise, much of the local and regional trade in the eastern Balkans was still in the hands of Byzantine and Bulgarian merchants.[54]

As might be expected, most of the exports from the Adriatic or Black Sea ports originated in the Balkan hinterland. They included animal products (oxen, cows, sheep, goats, bees, horses, leather, hides and fur pelts),

[48] Dorin 2012, 242ff.

[49] See the examples given by Krekić 1961, 68–69; Laiou 1985, 145–146.

[50] See *Gramoty*, 13–14, for the Dubrovnik charter of Ivan II Asen given to the merchants of Ragusa; see also *Dubrovniški dokumenti*, 30–33, no. 2. For the Ragusan colony at Vidin, see *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae*, II, 309–311. In general for the relations between Bulgaria and Dubrovnik, see Kostova 2018, 319–339; Kostova 2019, 115–125.

[51] Krekić 1978b, 414.

[52] Krekić 1978b, 414–421; Laiou 2012, 137; Sokolov 1963, 284; Jacoby 2004, 85–132. For the trading privileges of the Italian city-states, see Lilie 1984.

[53] See for instance Kurtović 2014, 202–206; Kovačević 1961, 12, 159ff.

[54] Laiou 1980–1981, 188, 205 and 209–210 for the presence of Byzantine traders in Dubrovnik. For Bulgarian merchants in Dubrovnik, see Dujčev 1944, 50; Murzhev 2008, 250–251.

wax, honey, various forest products (wood, resin, charcoal), oil, wine and cereals (from Albania, Macedonia, the Black Sea and central Greece).[55] Another important commodity exported from the Balkans, usually through Dubrovnik, was slaves. Indeed, during the period in question, the Balkans emerged as one of the principal sources of slavery in the Mediterranean world.[56] Many of the men and women, who often ended up as domestic servants in Venetian households, came from Bosnia.[57] They were apparently Bogomils, who proved easy prey to merchants, because it was not generally considered a sin to put these 'heretics' into slavery.[58]

One commodity which enjoyed a significant share of Balkan trade was salt. This is hardly surprising, given that the Serbian and Bosnian economies were largely dependent on livestock for their existence. Consequently, there was a dual demand for salt, for the people themselves and for their cattle.[59] From early on, Dubrovnik emerged as one of the main suppliers of this commodity in the region, serving as an important intermediary for the transit of Albanian salt to the hinterland.[60] In the eastern part of the peninsula, Wallachian and Transylvanian salt was sold in large quantities to various foreign powers.[61] What is more, one of the main branches of Balkan trade dealt with the import (from Italy or the Levant) of manufactured and luxury goods such as high quality cloths made from wool, linen, cotton or silk, which were sold mainly to the upper classes, as well as cheaper, drabber cloths for the general market.[62]

Undoubtedly, the most important of the Balkan export goods were derived from the rich Serbian and Bosnian ore deposits. From the mid-thirteenth century onwards, and as the Bohemian-Hungarian mineral resource base had effectively collapsed, silver, lead, copper and other precious metals were extracted in enormous quantities from the mines of Brskovo, Novo Brdo, Rudnik, Trepča, Gračanica, Lipnik and Srebrenica,

[55] Carter 1972, 101–102, 248–259; Dorin 2012, 242–243; Laiou 2012, 146.

[56] Verlinden 1970, 57–140; Verlinden 1972, 23–55. On the role of Dubrovnik in the slave trade, see Krekić 1978a, 379–394; Krekić 1989, 67–75.

[57] Dorin 2012, 251, with several examples.

[58] Solovjev 1946, 139–162; Verlinden 1967, 683–700.

[59] Carter 1972, 243.

[60] It should be noted that the many lagoons along the Albanian coast rendered the region ideal for the production of the staple; Dorin 2012, 255; see also Ducellier 1981, 188–190 for the purchase of substantial quantities of Albanian salt by Ragusan merchants.

[61] Rădvan 2010, 232.

[62] Carter 1972, 259–264.

to mention but a few, and transported overland to the coast to be exported (mainly by Ragusan merchants) to the Adriatic and the Levant.[63] In the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries this was still a booming industry—the source of the wealth that allowed the Nemanjić dynasty to build up a powerful state that dominated in the Balkans.

More Travel, More Money, More Banditry?

In a ground-breaking article written in 1978, Alexander Murray claimed that the advancing wave of monetization in parts of western Europe between the tenth and twelfth centuries was accompanied by a roughly corresponding wave of robbery, reaching a conspicuous intensity in the 1070s, especially in ill-ruled areas.[64] In other words, he saw a direct connection between the growth of the market economy (as well as the growth in travel) and the rise in the scale of highway robberies. Although Murray was—rightly—criticized for working with a relatively small number of (mostly hagiographical) sources which are neither completely reliable nor necessarily representative of the wider picture, his hypothesis is nevertheless stimulating in many respects.[65] To be sure, it is tempting to wonder whether the correlation between money, travel and robbery is operative in a Balkan context, and if so, whether this can help us to better understand the phenomenon of brigandage and its workings.

We begin by noting two facts: first of all, as far as we can tell from the evidence available to us, the problem of banditry intensified roughly in the period between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Second, despite the relatively low level of monetization and the persistence of an exchange based on barter in parts of the region, most notably in Byzantine-held Bulgaria, the frequency with which isolated or site-finds occur increases from the first half of the ninth century.[66] In the Byzantine territories this increase was more marked during the twelfth and early thirteenth

[63] Dinić 1955–1962; Kovačević 1960, 248–258; Kovačević 1970, 133–138; Ćirković 1981, 41–49; Carter 1972, 223–239; Dorin 2012, 261.

[64] Murray 1978, 55–94.

[65] See in particular Reuter 2006, 42.

[66] For evidence pertaining to the presence of coin hoards dated between the late eleventh and thirteenth centuries in Bulgaria, see, among others, Dočev 2009, 171–190; Bojadžiev 2009, 25–27, at 26; Minkova 2008, 65–93.

centuries.[67] In the second Bulgarian state, on the other hand, there is a dramatic increase of coin circulation from the late twelfth century, culminating in the years 1218–1240 and again in the fourteenth century—an increase that can be directly associated with the growth of market activities and local trade in the northeastern part of the state.[68] In Serbia, starting from the thirteenth century, the members of the Nemanjić dynasty minted their own silver coin, the *dinar*, although a significant role in internal transactions was also played by the Venetian *grosso*, which flowed into the Serbian kingdom in large quantities in the course of flourishing international trade contacts. The exploitation of Serbia's massive ore deposits (and the subsequent creation of mints at Rudnik, Novo Brdo, Trepča, Ras, Brskovo, Prizren, Peć, Priština, Skopje, Ohrid and Bar) led to the rapid development of a monetary economy and the increase of coin circulation until the fourteenth century.[69]

Transactions in the Serbian *dinar* and other foreign currencies (mainly Venetian) are mentioned in several documents from Dubrovnik, where a local currency was introduced somewhere between 1284 and 1301 and a mint was in production from 1337, issuing copper and silver coins of various types.[70] As silver, copper, iron and lead began flowing in large quantities from the Balkan mines towards the Adriatic coast and then to the West, Dubrovnik emerged as the focal point of various economic operations, in which, apart from the Ragusans themselves, the main participants were Italians. From approximately the middle of the thirteenth century, the rapidly expanding Ragusan economy needed ever larger capital for investment, and, naturally, credit operations became an important part of the city's economic activity. Thus Bariša Krekić estimated that between 1280 and 1400 over two million Venetian *ducats* were loaned by local or

[67] Metcalf 1979, 18; Hendy 1991, 637–679; Morrisson 2002, 959–960. According to Morrisson, the monetization level for the whole Byzantine economy at the height of its prosperity, towards the middle of the twelfth century, was about 46%.

[68] Indeed, after 1204 the number of hoards found in Bulgaria increased drastically in comparison with the previous periods. At the same time, the study of single coin-finds within the urban centres, where coinage was found in substantial numbers, suggests that the increase of hoarding is paralleled by relevant increase of the single-coin circulation. It has thus been convincingly argued that the increase in hoarding was not only the result of the growing political insecurity in the region; instead, it indicates a shift from a land-based, state-commanded economy to a public economy of exchange, where more people used more money; see the excellent analysis by Murzhev 2008, 259–298.

[69] Hristovska–Ivanišević 2006, 108–109; Dimitrijević 2001; Dimitrijević 2006.

[70] Metcalf 1965, 286; Carter 1972, 557–558.

foreign businessmen in Dubrovnik. Interestingly enough, much of that money was loaned to merchants from the Adriatic coast, Serbia and Bosnia, and was used chiefly to carry on trade with the Balkan hinterland—a fact that clearly reflects the relatively high degree of monetary exchange in the region.[71]

In view of all the above, it becomes evident that the intensification of the problem of banditry roughly coincides in time with an increase in the use and circulation of money across a large part of the Balkans. But is this enough by itself to establish a connection between the two? To be sure, bandits were primarily interested in money, though in reality few of their victims could be expected to carry large amounts of cash with them. Merchants and members of diplomatic delegations were undoubtedly among them but, crucially, they also carried other valuables (for instance, any sort of embassy for a marriage or a peace treaty was almost certain to be carrying gifts), which were an equally attractive booty.[72] Indeed, in Venetian and Ragusan archives we find numerous reports listing the damages suffered by merchants in Dalmatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Bulgaria.[73] The loot included luxury goods such as textiles, precious metals and jewellery, but also less expensive items—although still of importance to their owners—such as animals (horses, oxen, goats and sheep), cereals, clothes, footwear (boots and leather shoes), weapons, salt, wine etc.[74] Having said that, it should be noted that there are also many known incidents in which bandits took from their victims the little they had in order to satisfy their needs.

In this light, the scarcely escapable conclusion is that the intensification of banditry was largely independent of the growing circulation of money. Bandits were equally interested in other valuables, which either were intended for personal use or could be easily disposed of, given their high 'marketability' (as in the case of precious metals, horses and textiles). In

[71] Krekić 1979, 241–254.

[72] For example, in the *Life of St Germanos of Kosinitza* (ninth century), we hear of a Byzantine embassy on the way to Serbia, headed by two officials, who eventually agreed to pay the fee requested by Germanos' abductors for his release. The saint is said to have owed the latter 100 golden coins; *Life of Germanos of Kosinitza*, 9. Several examples of the gifts carried by Serbian embassies are offered by Porčić 2016, 100–101, 103. For the types of gifts presented by Ragusan embassies to the Nemanjid court, see *Monumenta ragusina*, 22, 37, 234–235, 298.

[73] Krekić 1978b, 415–416, for several examples.

[74] Kurtović, 2012, 95.

any case, if there was one condition which was itself likely to raise the scale of banditry, that was the growth in travel. As more people used the overland routes through the Balkans—and we know that this was certainly the case from the tenth or eleventh century onwards—it was only natural that the number of bandits operating along the way would also grow. What made things even worse, however, was the inability of Balkan governments to provide adequate policing in the countryside. In the absence of effective measures to improve the security of travellers (for which see Chap. 6), the Balkan road network was bound to become infested with thieves and highway robbers during the period under consideration.

CHAPTER 5

Shepherds, Military Men and 'Bandit Societies'

The single largest problem faced by historians dealing with the phenomenon of banditry in the medieval Balkans is the limited available information regarding bandits themselves. While bandits tried to leave as few traces as possible of their existence and whereabouts, it is also true that medieval authors were generally not interested in them and, subsequently, the depth of information they provide about these men is, in most cases, shallow. Nevertheless, the analysis of this material, especially of the more detailed reports, enables us to classify Balkan bandits into four main categories according to their social/professional background: the shepherd, the soldier, the noble bandit and the peasant, the last representing, naturally, a more general category. Of course, it must be stressed that some of the four types of bandit are not always entirely distinct. They occasionally overlap, as, for instance, in the case of a soldier-bandit who may have lived and operated within a peasant society. It goes without saying that since this classification is based only on a fragment of the surviving evidence, it does not touch on all Balkan bandits. However, by including some of the best-known cases, it is hoped that it will significantly contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon.

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The Shepherd

As noted already, in most Balkan sources, pastoralism, especially transhumance, was strongly associated with 'Vlachs', an ethnic term that, according to some scholars, may have taken an occupational meaning as well, so that a Vlach came gradually also to denote a shepherd.[1] To be sure, Vlachs figure prominently in reported incidents of banditry in the Balkans. What is particularly interesting is the geographical span of these attacks, which is very extensive. Indeed, Vlachs are recorded as being responsible for acts of banditry near the Adriatic coast, in Serbia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, the northern Balkans and central Greece.

The first reference to Vlach banditry comes from an eleventh-century runic inscription found on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. The inscription, set at the cemetery of Sjonem by the couple Rodvisl and Rodelf, commemorates their son Rodfos, a merchant who was travelling to Constantinople through the land of the Vlachs (*Blakumen*), where he was robbed of his belongings and killed. Although the exact location of this *Blakumen* cannot be established with certainty, it is reasonable to suppose that it was situated somewhere in the northern Balkans.[2]

Additional evidence is offered by Benjamin of Tudela, a twelfth-century Jewish traveller from Spain, who in his *Itinerary* describes the Vlachs of Thessaly as being "as lawless as the Druses of the Sidon region of Lebanon", adding that "they were so swift as hinds and swept down from the mountains to despoil and ravage the land of Greece". The Vlachs, according to Benjamin, were not true Christians, since they gave themselves Jewish names. "Some people say that they are Jews and, in fact, they call the Jews

[1] Fine 2006, 129 and Chap. 3 above. For the Vlachs in general, see Năsturel 1979, 87–112.

[2] *Gotlands runinskrifter*, I, 263–268; Mărculeț 2010, 585–594. For Vlachs north of the Danube River mentioned in Norse sources, see Armbruster 1990, 34–36; Curta 2006, 303–304. One of the earliest references to Vlachs comes from a fourteenth-century manuscript of John Skylitzes' chronicle. This contains information about the western Balkans which was interpolated into Skylitzes' text by the bishop Michael of Devol in the early twelfth century. We thus hear that one of the four 'Kometopouloi', who led the Bulgar insurrection against the Byzantine Empire in 976, was killed between Katroia and Prespa by Vlach *hoditai*. Various definitions have been given to this term (bandit, vagabond, traveller), but the most commonly accepted is 'guard'—guard of roads or caravans; see John Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 329 (Trans.: 312); Stănescu 1968, 411–415; Moustakas 1998, 151–152. For the interpolation of Michael of Devol, see Prokić 1906; Ferluga 1967, 163–170.

their brethren, and when they meet with them, though they rob them, they refrain from killing them as they kill the Greeks".[3]

Particularly interesting is the evidence provided by Western chronicles describing the passage of the armies of the Third Crusade through the northern Balkans. According to the *Historia expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, which interpolates a letter compiled by the German emperor to his son Henry in November 1189, "as soon as we reached the borders of the emperor of Constantinople, we suffered no small loss by robbery of goods and killing of our men".[4] And indeed, by the time the army started marching through the 'Bulgarian forest' (*silva bulgarica*), the region stretching from the Hungarian border to the valley of Philippopolis, it was constantly harassed by "Greculos, Bulgares, Servigios et Flachos semibarbaros", an action that Frederick believed to have been instigated by the *doux* of Braničevo.[5] Whether acting under orders from the Byzantine emperor or not, the *doux* is likely to have engaged the services of 'professional bandits', who appear to have been active in that region.[6]

Further evidence presenting Vlachs as a source of unrest within Byzantine society is presented by the metropolitan of New Patras, Euthymios Malakes, who in the funerary oration he delivered on the occasion of the death of Demetrios Tornikes mentions "the terrible and outlandish barbarians inhabiting the rough and precipitous parts of Hellas" who until the governorship of Alexios Kontostephanos (ca. 1160) were "footpads and bandits and hostile to the tax officials".[7] What is more, in a letter dated to 1221, John Apokaukos, the bishop of Naupaktos (1199–1233), refers to a young woman from Vonitsa who was allegedly raped and left pregnant by a Vlach named Konstantinos Avrilionis. When her father protested to him, Avrilionis, along with approximately thirty of

[3] Benjamin of Tudela, *Itinerary*, 68. See, however, Curta 2016a, 445–449, who argues that the description of the Vlachs is a later addition to the text.

[4] Ansbert, *Historia de expeditione*, 40 (Trans.: 60).

[5] Ansbert, *Historia de expeditione*, 28 (Trans.: 60); see also the discussion by Uzelac 2011. For the 'Bulgarian forest', see Dall'Aglio 2010.

[6] For a detailed account of these events, see Stephenson 2000, 294–300. Attacks by Slav bandits against the armies of the First Crusade along the Adriatic coast are also reported by Raymond of Aguilers, *Liber*, 36–37. In the valley of Pelagonia, Adhemar of Le Puy, the papal legate, was ambushed and robbed by a band of wandering Petchnegs; Raymond of Aguilers, *Liber*, 39; see also Brundage 1959, 203–204.

[7] Efthymios Malakes, 145.

his compatriots (*meth' omogenous laou*), assaulted him and his son-in-law with sticks, nearly killing them.[8]

An interesting episode possibly involving Vlach brigands is reported on the well-known account of Nikephoros Gregoras on the delegation to the Serbian court in 1327 for the safe return of Eirene, daughter of Theodore Metochites and widow of John Palaiologos, who had died at Skopje. While riding up the Strymon valley, Gregoras points out that it was unsafe for the Byzantine delegation to continue into the night seeking a lodging place, for "certain attacks of bandits continuously took place earlier and had made that place an untraversed wilderness".[9] In fact, shortly afterwards, Gregoras' party encountered a group of 'Mysians'—a term used by some authors to denote Vlachs.[10] It turned out that they were road guards, originally hired by a local landowner or a Byzantine official, to keep others from plundering, but due to poor supervision, and perhaps equally poor pay, they began to plunder on their own.[11]

The connection between banditry and pastoralism also surfaces in an episode from the *Life of St Gregory of Sinai*, written by Kallistos, patriarch of Constantinople (1350–1353, 1355–1363) and former disciple of the

[8] ἔφησε γάρ, ὡς Αὐριλιόνης τις, Ῥωμαίων ἄποικος, ὄνομα Κωνσταντῖνος, Βλάχους τοῦτο τὸ γένος ὁ καιρός ὠνόμασεν ἄνθρωπος, κατά χρόνον τόν πέρυσι, Βλασίαν, τήν αὐτοῦ θυγατέραν, παρθένον οὖσαν καί νέαν, ἀπερχομένην ὑδρεύσασθαι ἀπό τῆς ἔγγιστά που πηγῆς, κατασχών καί περί τινα ῥαγάδα γῆς ἀγαγών, ἔνθα βοήθειαν ἔσεσθαί πόθεν τῇ Βλασίᾳ ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος οὐκ ᾤετο, ἀλλ' οὐδέ φωνούσης ἀκουσθῆναι ὑπό τινος, τήν παρθενικήν ἐκεῖσε πυλίδα τῆς Βλασίας ἀνέῳξε. ἐξ ἐκείνου δέ ὡς αὐτῇ περιέτυχεν, ἐπάγων βίαν ἐμίγνυτο, ἕως ποιήσας ἐγκύμονα καί παῖδα ταύτης ἀπέτεκε [….] ἐγκοτῶν μοι τῆς θυγατρός ὑπερμαχομένῳ ἤ ἄνθρωπόν με ὑπολαβών ἀβοήθητον, καθότι καί ταπεινός, μεθ' ὁμογενοῦς λαοῦ ἐπελθών περί τόν μέσον δρόμον τῆς αὐτίκα νυκτός, ὑπελεύκαινε δέ σελήνη τήν νύκτα ἐκείνην, καί πλῆθος εἰκάζειν ἦν ἐς τριάκοντα, ἐμέ τε καί Νικόλαον, τόν ἐφ' ἑτέρα θυγατρί μου γαμβρόν, ἀπανθρώπως ῥάβδοις ἠκίσαντο; John Apokaukos, *Writings*, 61, no. 5; Lampropoulos 1988, 271–272, no. 12.

[9] Nikeph. Gregoras, *Letters*, no. 32a, here at 106 (letter to Athanasios) and 115–124, no. 32b (for this same letter that Gregoras sent to Andronikos Zaridas). The letter was eventually incorporated into his *History*, 374–383.

[10] οὐκοῦν ἀλλ' ἐν τούτοις ὄντων ἡμῶν ἐξαίφνης ἀνίστανταί τινες ἄνδρες τῶν ἐκεῖσε πετρῶν καὶ φαράγγων [….]. Μυσῶν γὰρ ἄποικοι τῶν ἐκεῖσε προσοικούντων εἰσὶν ἀρχῆθεν οἱ πλείους καὶ τοῖς ἡμῖν ὁμοφύλοις ἀναμὶξ τὴν δίαιταν ἔχοντες; Nikeph. Gregoras, *Letters*, 108, no. 32. Niketas Choniates talks about "the barbarians who lived in the vicinity of Mount Haimos, formerly called Mysians and now called Vlachs"; Niketas Choniates, *History*, 368 (Trans.: 204); see also Theodore Skoutariotes, *Synopsis*, 370. However, other authors apply the ethnonym 'Mysians' to the Bulgarians; see for instance Michael Attaleiates, *History*, 9 (Trans.: 13).

[11] Bartusis 1981, 395; Belke 2002, 83–84; Karpozilos 1993, 529–530. According to Oikonomides 1996, 14, these men may have been collecting duties from passers-by.

saint. Between 1335 and 1341, Gregory, who was previously forced to leave Mount Athos because of the incursions of Turkish brigands and pirates, returned to Paroria, at the northern edge of the Strandža Mountain in Thrace. An attempt to settle there a few years earlier had also failed due to the dangers posed by local bandits. As these robbers were still active in the area, Gregory had a message sent to the ruler of Bulgaria, Ivan Alexander (1331–1371), explaining how he could not be expected to hold out long against them. The Tsar generously responded to his appeal. He gave him money and various supplies for the monk's sustenance, and had a strong tower build for their defence.[12] Subsequently, it seems that for a while peace and security were restored in Paroria. Thus, according to the biographer of Gregory, most of the murderous robbers were converted by the saint to repentance and "became humble shepherds".[13] If this account is taken at face value, one may venture to suggest that these 'shepherds' were Vlachs.[14]

Undoubtedly, the most substantial evidence connecting Vlachs with banditry comes from the State archives of Dubrovnik. The relevant information is mainly contained in records of lawsuits and settlement agreements.[15] Overall, hundreds of cases of robbery and banditry are recorded for the fourteenth and—especially—fifteenth centuries, a fact that points to the intensity and persistence of the phenomenon.[16] Most of those accused were coming from the hinterland of Dubrovnik, and particularly the areas that commanded the trade routes between that city and the

[12] *Life of Gregory of Sinai*, 343–344. For an analysis of this passage, see also Chap. 2.

[13] ἀλλὰ καταλαβὼν καὶ τὰ δηλωθέντα παρόροια τὴν, ὡς εἴρηται, βαθυτάτην ἐκείνην καὶ ἀοίκητον ἔρημον, πνευματικὸν ἐργαστήριον ἀπειργάσατο ἀναχωνεύων οἰονεὶ καὶ ἀναπλάττων ἐπὶ τὸ κρεῖττον τοὺς ἐκεῖσε προσιόντας ἐκείνῳ, καθὰ δὴ καὶ τοὺς ἀπηγριωμένους καὶ θηριώδεις ἐκείνους διὰ τὴν ἐν τῇ χρονίαν ἐν τῇ λῃστείᾳ διατριβὴν καὶ λωποδύτας καὶ ἀνδροφόνους μόνῃ τῇ ἑαυτοῦ θεωρίᾳ καὶ παραινέσει εἰς τὸ ἡμερώτερον μετεσκεύασε καὶ ποιμένας ἐν ταπεινοτέρῳ κατέστησε σχήματι; *Life of Gregory of Sinai*, 346; Bartusis 1981, 390–391. For the exact location of Paroria, see *Life of Gregory of Sinai* (comm.), 159–183; Soustal 1991, 388–389; Tachiaos 1983, 117; Charizanis 2003, 171–179.

[14] Indeed, we know that Vlachs were employed by monasteries at Mount Athos. This was probably the case with the 'Vlachs of Lavra' for whom the monastery secured the free use of an imperial summer pasturage; *Actes de Lavra*, I, no. 66; Leffort 2002, 265–266. Similar arrangements may well have been in place between the monastic institutions of Paroria and Vlach pastoralists.

[15] See Chap. 2.

[16] For a concise survey of banditry in medieval Bosnia, see Duranović 2017.

Balkan interior.[17] Vlachs played a prominent role among them. Some scholars have even regarded banditry as being one of their primary occupations.[18]

The history of several Vlach communities in the hinterland of Dubrovnik—in medieval Bosnia—has been thoroughly investigated by Esad Kurtović, whose comprehensive research on mainly unpublished material from the State archives of Dubrovnik has yielded important results.[19] Probably most important among those communities were the Bobani Vlachs, who were mainly settled in the area around Popovo Polje and Površ in Hum (Župa of Popovo, present-day Herzegovina), not far from Dubrovnik's northern borders and the 'Trebinje road', the important commercial route linking the coastland with the interior.[20] The surviving evidence suggests that their settlements formed a unit with certain collective obligations towards several noble Bosnian families, including the Nikololići and the Kosače.[21] The main occupation of the Bobani Vlachs, but also of the other local Vlach communities such as the Nenkovići, the Predojevići, the Mirilovći and the Vragovići, was stock-breeding. They bred horses, oxen, cows, sheep and goats, some of which were, in fact, owned by Ragusans. They were not involved in the caravan trade (as was the case with many Bosnian Vlachs who often acted as armed escorts for foreign merchants),[22] but often participated in credit operations, taking goods on credit from Ragusans and placing them on the market in the hinterland. They also engaged in agriculture and various crafts, while many of them left for Dubrovnik, where they worked as household servants.[23]

[17] Kurtović 2014, 295–296; Duranović 2017, 73–109; see also references in *Iz Dubrovačkog arhiva*.

[18] For some examples of Vlachs accused of robbery, see *Kancelariski spisi*, 34, 138, 140, 162; *Lam. de foris*, III, 141; *Lam. de foris*, IV, 175v and 120v; *Lam. de foris*, IX, 67; *Lam. de foris*, XVII, 97v; *Lam. de foris*, XVIII, 3v.

[19] See Kurtović 2008; Kurtović 2009; Kurtović 2011a; Kurtović 2011c; Kurtović 2012.

[20] Kurtović 2012, 14–22. For the 'Trebinje road' see Chap. 4.

[21] Kurtović 2012, 53–57. For the Nikolić and the Kosača families, see Fine 1987, 279, 455–456.

[22] See for example *Div. canc.*, XXXIV, 178v; XXXV, 235v; XLII, 295v; Kurtović 2009, 154, 156, 158. For Vlach escorts to caravans or diplomatic embassies, see Krekić 1961, 46 and 274–175, no. 681.

[23] Kurtović 2012, 94–95. For a thorough study of the history of Vlach populations in the hinterland of Dubrovnik, especially those living in the southwestern parts of Nemanjid Serbia (eastern Hum and Travunija) between the second half of the thirteenth and the middle of the

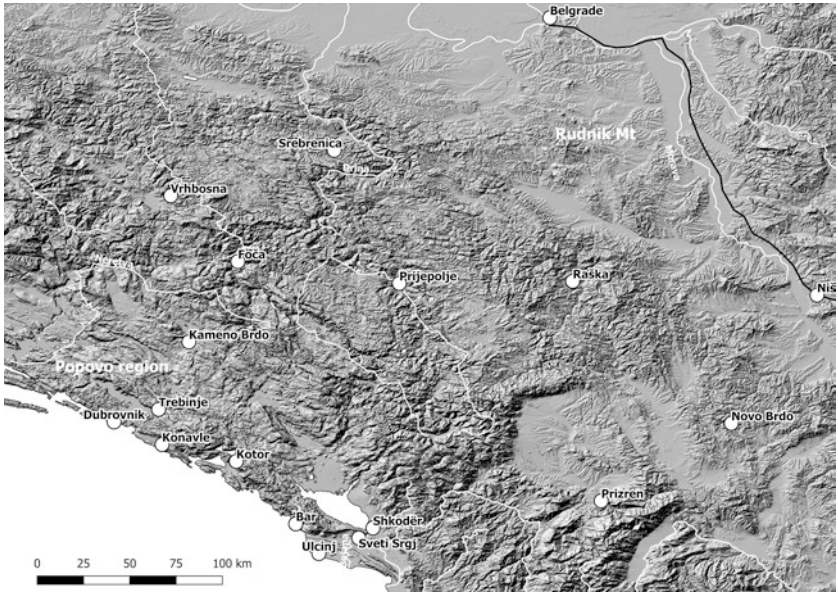

Fig. 5.1 Dubrovnik and the surrounding area

The evidence from the Dubrovnik archives makes it abundantly clear that banditry constituted another important part of their economic activity.[24] Indeed, 116 cases of highway or house robbery involving Bobani Vlachs have been recorded for the period between 1410 and 1473. In each of these, a lawsuit was filed by the injured party against the person or persons who carried out the attack.[25] In this connection, two points need to be made. First, in all 116 cases the transgressors are named. They are members—some of them prominent—of the Bobani community. The victims had evidently recognized them, although the fact that very few of them were ever punished may suggest that most of the time the

fourteenth centuries, see Pijović 2018. Pijović notes the increasing importance of Vlachs in the economic, military and political life of that region, as a result of which their percentage in the overall population of medieval Serbia and Bosnia grew steadily during the period in question.

[24] For incidents of banditry involving other Bosnian-Vlach communities as reported in the Dubrovnik archives, see Duranović 2017, 94–109.

[25] See the appendix (table "Vlasi Bobani u pljačkama") in Kurtović 2012, 102–127.

accusations could not be proven. Second, if in 116 incidents the transgressors were recognized and a lawsuit was filed against them, it is only reasonable to suppose that the number of robberies which were never reported, either because the perpetrators remained unknown or for any other reason, must have been considerably higher.

The information contained in the Dubrovnik archives significantly enhances our understanding of the workings of banditry during the period in question. For example, we learn that the Bobani Vlachs robbed their victims both on their own and on neighbouring territory, but rarely operated in very remote areas.[26] It is clear that they were mainly active near the busy arterial routes connecting Dubrovnik with the hinterland. Their loot included cattle animals, usually oxen, cows, sheep and goats, horses, donkeys, pigs, bees and chicken, textiles, coarse fabrics, various types of clothes (shirts, hats, dresses, scarves, coats, boots and leather shoes), towels and blankets, rings, belts, bags, purses, arms (knives and swords), salt, wine and money, as well as other personal belongings of travellers. In addition, they abducted and sold people into slavery.[27] Given that the Bobani Vlachs were primarily stock-breeders, it is safe to infer that, through banditry and, particularly, the acquisition of cattle, they were able to improve their economic position.

The evidence derived from the lawsuits against the Bobani Vlachs also contributes towards an understanding of the 'sociology' of Balkan banditry. Indeed, as noted already, it is particularly interesting that some of the men engaged in highway robberies were among the most prominent members of their community. This was, for instance, the case with Vukota Nenčić, who in the sources appears as a *katunar* (i.e. leader of the *katun*).[28] Between 1404 and 1423 Nenčić reportedly conducted trading business,[29] but at the same time was accused of carrying out several robberies,

[26] Kurtović 2012, 83.

[27] Duranović 2017, 123–185; Kurtović 2012, 83.

[28] Braian Miroeuich de Merzeuo homo ser Nicolini de Gondola coram domino Simone de Goziis Rectore conqueritur supra Ratchum Pocraycich et supra Dubrauac de Xagora homines Biluize Cobiglacich et Obriuogla Pocraicich et supra Vocota Nincich catonarium (17.01.1413); *Lam. de foris*, III, 44v; Kurtović 2012, 26. For the *katun*, see below.

[29] Volchotta Nencich vlach facit manifestum quod ipse, una cum predictis promixit et se obligauit Pripcho Radoslaglich dare et aportare hic in Ragusio viginti salmas lignaminis schotani bonas et suficientes et boni scotani sacarcati et necti secundum quod asportauit Ragusium pro qualibet salma grossos sex usque ad viginti dies proxime futuros et de presenti viazio (10.11.1404); *Div. canc.*, XXXV, 125v; Kurtović 2012, 25.

including one in which, with the help of his son Dobrilo and three other men, he is said to have stolen two horses, one saddle and four goats.[30] Another *katunar*, Miljen Bogavčić, is named as a transgressor in numerous lawsuits.[31] But we also hear that in June 1446 he was requested to hold a judicial hearing over a house robbery, for which his nephew Vukoslav Vukšić was among the main suspects.[32] Perhaps unsurprisingly, one month later the hearing was dismissed and Vukšić was set free.[33]

This evidence leaves little doubt that bandits like the Bobani—and surely other—Vlachs operated within a very specific social network, based on kinship/communal ties. It was upon this network that they depended for carrying out their deeds, but also for support and protection.[34] Indeed, it is no mere coincidence that many of the robberies involving Bobani Vlachs were allegedly committed by siblings. Thus, in August 1428 a

[30] Vladissaua Radouinoua coram domino Rectore ser Clemente de Bodaca conqueritur supra Volcectam Nincich et Dobrillum eius filium et Radouacium Boigouich et Miglen Bogaucich et Radossauum Milatouich. Eo quia predicti accusati violenter acceperunt dicte accusatrici duos equos et unam sellam et quatuor capras (19.05.1423); *Lam. de foris*, V, 172v; Kurtović 2012, 27–28.

[31] See for example *Lam. de foris*, IX, 153v.

[32] Die XXIII junii 1446. Pro dominum Rectorem ser Marinum Mi. de Bona et suos judicium ser Antonium Cle. de Goze, ser Marinum Ju. de Georgio, ser Junium de Calich et ser Nicolam Pau. de Gondolla, viso lamento suprascripto et visa littera sclaua tenoris infrascripti, videlicet,—Magnifici et potenti signori, miser lo Rector et zentilhomeni el vostro seruidor Miglien Bogaucich homo inteso quelo me scrisse la vostra signoria pro el nostro seruidor Gliubissa ve auiso che ho trouado che le ha fato furto homeni del mio cathuno ha nome Andreas cum lo suo fradelo Radiuoi Uxinouichi et lo furto hano portado coli soi cugnadi cum Radiuoi Ratchouich azo e caxon Vocossauo Vochsich lo qual ha mendo li ladri a far lo furto lo qual e mio nieuo. Et li deti vien a Ragusi et la vostra segnoria fara qual che li piaxera etc.—Terminatum fuit quod suprascriptus Vocossaus Vochsich debeat dare plezariam pro capite et data plezaria debeat se purgare cum tribus et ipso conuicto quod ipse non fuit culpabilis de suprascripto furto, videlicet, quod non fuit causa conducendi suprascriptos fures nec aliquid sit de suprascripto furto. Et datus fuit pro priestau Stiepanus famulus regiminis. Qui porodnici sunt infrascripti, videlicet, Millath Radoucich, Peruos Radmirouich, Radath Petchouich, Vocossau Vochsich. Die XXVI junii fuit primus termini ad quem terminum se presentauerunt Vocossaus Vochsich principalis et Millath Radoucich et alii duo, videlicet, Peruos Radmirouich et Radath Petchouich. Non se presentaurent ad terminum secundum relationem priestau et datos fuit secundus terminus usque pro totam die dominicam proxime futuros, videlicet, die III julii proxime futuros; *Lam. de foris*, XVII, 244; Kurtović 2012, 29–30.

[33] Kurtović 2012, 30. For another case of a prominent Vlach involved in acts of brigandage, see Pijović 2018, 123 n. 347.

[34] As we will see below, this network can be accurately described as a 'bandit network'.

certain Stipko Milošević sued the brothers Koran and Vukašin Vukmirović for stealing an ox in Popovo. Interestingly enough, two other brothers, Radak and Radelja Mišljenović, were named as witnesses.[35] Furthermore, in October 1443, two of the sons of Vukša Bogavčić, along with several other men, were held responsible for the theft of a horse loaded with grain.[36] By the same token, in January 1449 a lawsuit was filed against a number of people for the robbery of five pieces of fabric and 140 *perpera*. The accused included Dobrilo Vukotić and his son Ivaniš, the brothers Brajan and Vukašin Vignjević, the brothers Vukić and Dragić Dobrilović, the brothers Vukašin and Vladisav Vukmirović, and the brothers Ratko and Vitko Božidarović.[37] Vukić and Ivaniš Dobrilović, along with forty-two other people, were also charged with robbery in August 1456.[38] Two members of that same family, the brothers Obrad and Dobro Dobrilović,

[35] Stipcus Miloseuich coram nobili et sapienti viro domino Rectore ser Vita Cle. de Resti conqueritur supra Coran Vochmirouich et Vocasinum eius fratrem et Budag Petchouich vlachos Bobani. Eo quia hodie est tercius dies quod predicti furati sibi fuerunt de Popou unum bouem quem vias abduxerint. Testes: Radasinus Milich homo Gregorii Nicholich, Radeia Mislienouich de Boban et Radach frater dicti Radei (21.08.1428); *Lam. de foris*, VIII, 69v; Kurtović 2012, 48.

[36] Vuchmier Cogneuodich coram domino Rectore ser Marino Ju. de Georgio fecit lamentum supra Vuchac Vuxich et Vocosauum eius fratrem, dicens quod ipsi acceperunt sibi unum equum carigum farina et cum bisaciis in Bobame per vim. Et cum ipsis fuerunt Milat Radoucich, Radogna Misienouich et Bogdanus Pocraicich et Obriuoglia eius frater (27.10.1443); *Lam. de foris*, XVII, 82v; Kurtović 2012, 29.

[37] Ruschus Dmitrouich de Vergato coram domino Rectore domino Alouisio de Goze fecit lamentum supra Dobrilum Vuchotich et Iuanis eius filium et Vuchasinum Viggneuich et Braianum eius fratrem et Dragich Dobrilouich et Vuchich eius fratrem et Miluni Radouanouich et Giuras Radouanouich et Vuchasinum Vuchmierouich et Vladissauum eius fratrem et Ratchum Bosidarouich et Vitchum eius fratrem et Vuxam Miobratouich et Vuchac et Vuchossauum eius fratrem et Radiuoi Radouanouich et Raianum Radouanich et Bogliesauum Bogdanouich, dicens quod ipse venerunt et per vim acceperunt sibi yperperis centum quadraginta grossi VIII et pannos quinque, unum de 60 et alios de L^{ta}, ex domo Raichi Miocich (21.01.1449); *Lam. de foris*, XXII, 6v; Kurtović 2012, 33.

[38] Vuchmir Rachoeuich coram domino Rectore ser Laurentio de Ragnina lamentatur contra Vuchichum Dobrilouich de Bobani et contra Iuanissum Dobrilouich et Jurinum Radissich et Radicium Regoeuich et socios homines de chercech qui erant XLIIIIor, dicens quod per vim sibi rapuere res plurimas valoris yperperis LXXX et de pluri in denariis sibi rapuere yperperis XX et unum ensem et unam cortellessam et insuper vulnerauerunt ipsum Vuchmir super capite cum magna sanguinis effussione (26.08.1456); *Lam. de foris*, XXIX, 251v; Kurtović 2012, 36.

were accused of robbing a certain Jakob Vukničić in September 1467.[39] Finally, this same Dobro, along with another brother, Viganj, is reported to have stolen a cow, an ox and a calf two years later.[40]

In view of the evidence presented above, it is safe to assume that banditry among pastoral Vlach communities was largely a 'family affair'. It was carried out by members of an extended kin network, made up of both 'blood' and 'marriage' relations, and adhered to a set of traditional values and codes, according to which cattle-lifting, highway robbery and murder were counted deeds of honour.[41] Among other things, bribery and gift-giving seem to have served as a means of forging or maintaining bonds of kinship or clientage.[42] The protection that such a network afforded to its members becomes clearly visible in the case of the hearings over the allegations against Bobani Vlachs. As seen already, these were held within the community and were presided over by the local authorities (*katunars/knjez*), who, one would imagine, were reluctant to punish those accused.[43]

[39] Gliubissaua Vochinchna et mater Jacobi marangoni Vochinchinich comparuit dominis judicibus de criminalis quorum caput fuit ser Johannes de Lucaris pro dicto suo filio Jacobo et lamentum detullit contra et aduersus Vigagni, Obradum et Dobrie fratres fillios Dobrilli de vlachis Bobani, dicens ipsa Gliubissaua quod cum sit quod dictus eius filius Jacobus efugisset ex Ragusio propter delictum cuiusdam rixe et sic duxisset in villam de dictis vlachis de Bobani venerunt predicti et quam primum ipsum aprehenderunt et duxerunt in Vieternica deinde quando ipsum viderunt grauiter egrotum interato eum duxerunt in dictam villam acciperunt et derobantis sibi unum equum cum una sella et briglia (03.09.1467); *Lam. de foris*, XXXIX, 99; Kurtović 2012, 37.

[40] Radanus Ziucouich de Gromazia coram dominis judicibus de criminali quorum caput fuit ser Simon P. de Bona lamentum fecit contra Dobrie et Vigagn filios Dobrili Voccotich de Bobanis vlachos sic dictos, dicens quod predicti eum derobarunt accipientes ei unum bouem, unam vacham et unum jumentum necnon insuper eum verberarunt (18.01.1469); *Lam. de foris*, XLI, 73; Kurtović 2012, 37–38.

[41] In general, for the operation of 'family-based' bandit groups in medieval Bosnia, see Duranović 2017, 68–82.

[42] Thus we hear that in October 1444 Ivaniš Dobrilović stole a horse from Vlatko Oputic, and then offered it as a gift to the Vlach *knjez* Sladoj Vuković: Vlatchus Oputiza homo ser Nicole Mat. de Georgio coram domino Rectore ser Johanne de Menze fecit lamentum supra Iuanis Dobrilouich vlacchum de li Bobani, dicens quod furatus fuit sibi equum unum in Papaga qui erat suprascripti ser Nicole. Quem equum dictus Iuanis dedit comiti vlaccorum qui nominatur Sladoe Vocouich (09.10.1444); *Lam. de foris*, XVIII, 106v; Kurtović 2012, 34.

[43] See Kurtović 2012, 29–30.

It is hardly surprising that only a handful of Bobani Vlachs are known to have been imprisoned for banditry during this period.[44]

Apart from the Vlachs, two other ethnic—and principally pastoral—groups were heavily engaged in banditry, the Albanians and the Montenegrins. Both were organized (perhaps from the fourteenth or fifteenth century onwards) along tribal lines, although it is clear that during most of the Middle Ages two particularly important institutions among them were the *fis* and the *katun* (i.e. groups of people from several families or households gathered around a senior member under whose orders they conducted their economic activities; aside from that, the *katun* marks a seasonal camp or dwelling site where any such group of people lived).[45] These are thought to have gradually evolved into self-administering clans that had a common culture, common ancestry and shared social ties. In the regions where these groups settled, the paucity of fertile land was conducive to making pastoralism the main economic occupation. The martial skills acquired through the experience of pastoral life, coupled with the need to pick up arms and find vital resources in neighbouring territories, led to the development of a 'plunder economy', which became one of the main characteristics of medieval (and Ottoman) Albanian and Montenegrin cultures.[46]

This is particularly clear in the case of the Albanians. Byzantine sources have much to say about their tendency to engage in banditry, especially during the fourteenth century. To be sure, while the population occupying the lowlands in the area between the rivers Devolli and Shkumbi was well integrated into the Byzantine Empire and the Orthodox world, Albanian tribesmen in the mountains seem to have functioned freely regardless of which power they owed theoretical submission to.[47] In any case, from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, some elements of both these groups began to emigrate. There were several reasons for this. The continuous wars for domination in the region between Byzantium (and its successor states), Serbia, Venice, the Angevins and the

[44] Kurtović 2012, 36, 83–84, mentions some examples.

[45] See our comments in Chap. 3, n. 88. See also Beldiceanu—Beldiceanu-Steinherr—Năsturel 1988, 168, for Ottoman sources applying the term *katun* to Albanian pastoralists. For the *fis*, see Elsie 2015, 3–4.

[46] The grave danger posed to traders by Albanian and local Slav bandits in what is today southern Montenegro is noted in documents, including trading contracts, already from the late thirteenth century: *Kancelariski spisi*, 100.

[47] Ducellier 1968, 353–368; Nicol 1984, 48–49; Osswald 2007, 133–134.

Ottoman Turks, but also the pressures exerted onto the local Orthodox population by the (mainly Angevin) Catholic clergy, were certainly a contributing factor.[48] The gradual 'aristocratization' of Albanian society was clearly another. In the areas controlled or contested by the foreign powers, local leaders were rewarded for their services by receiving land and titles, a fact that ultimately transformed their relationship with the rest of their kinsmen—a relationship that went from egalitarian and horizontal to increasingly hierarchical and vertical. The subsequent tensions seem to have destroyed, to a considerable extent, old ties and loyalties uniting clans and communities, and resulted firstly in the overland migration of tribesmen into the south but also into Dalmatia and Italy, and secondly in the increasing nomadization of pastoral mountainous communities, as evidenced by the first explicit references to this phenomenon in the sources dated to the first three decades of the fourteenth century.[49]

It was in this general context that Albanian tribes and clans began roaming the lowlands of Epiros, Macedonia and western Greece, raiding them relentlessly. Given their unquestionable military prowess, many Albanians served as mercenaries in the Byzantine, Serb and Venetian armies, thus widening even further the area of their operations. Indeed, already in 1325 they seem to have been causing considerable disruption in Thessaly.[50] In 1337 they invaded the area of Berat and seized the fortresses of Skrepario, Timoro and Klisoura, before a Byzantine army defeated

[48] Ducellier 1979, 27–29; Krekić 1998, 213ff; Lala 2008. The outbreak of the Black Death in 1347 and the demographic crisis (depopulation) that followed in the coastal zone is frequently mentioned as another driving factor behind Albanian immigration. Indeed, the Albanian population in the highlands, being less affected by the epidemic, was now able to occupy the land left vacant; see Osswald 2007, 134.

[49] νομαδικὸν γὰρ τὸ γένος καὶ λυπρόβιον, οὐ πόλεσιν, οὐ φρουρίοις, οὐ κώμαις, οὐκ ἀγροῖς, οὐκ ἀμπελῶσιν, ἀλλ'ὄρεσι χαῖρον καὶ πεδιάσιν; Isidore of Kiev, *Panegyric*, 194; Ducellier 1979, 32–34.

[50] As pointed out by the letter written this year by Marino Sanudo the Elder to Ingramo, archbishop of Capua: Deus missit hanc pestem patriae Blachiae supradictae, quia ipsa miserat quoddam genus, Albanensium gentis nomine, in tanta quantitate numerosa, quae gens omnia quae erant extra castra penitus destruxerunt, tam eorum quam Catellanorum fuerunt, quam etiam eorum quae tenebantur a Graecis: et ad praesens consumunt et destruunt taliter, quod quasi nihil remansit penitus extra castra. Catellani et Graeci fuerunt quandoque simul ad expellendum Albanenses illos, sed nullatenus potuerunt. Dicitur etiam quod Albanenses illi volebant recedere a patria supradicta, scilicet Blachiae, quibus recedentibus occurrebant alii ejusdem gentis plurimi, dicentes illis: "quare hinc receditis?", responderunt: "quia non potuimus hic aliquod fortilitium obtinere". Quibus illi addierunt dicentes: "nolite hoc facere, quia multi cum uxoribus et filiis in vestrum adjutorium huc venimus; ed ideo omnes simul ad

them and forced them to retire.[51] Around 1341 the Greek population of Thessaly suffered anew from the raids and plundering forays of the Albanians, which saw the death of Andronikos III (1328–1341) as an ideal opportunity to act undisturbed.[52] The next decades saw a fresh wave of Albanian immigrants arriving in Epiros, Thessaly and western Greece with the Serbian forces that conquered these regions under Stefan Dušan (1331–1355).[53] By the 1360s, all of Epiros and Aetolia-Akarnania were controlled by a number of Albanian clans, and practically only the city of Ioannina was still in Greek hands. There, power was transferred to three foreign rulers, Thomas Preljubović (1367–1384), Esau Bondelmonti (1385–1411) and Carlo Tocco (1411–1429), who all used Ottoman help to defend the city from Albanian attacks.[54] Tocco finally achieved the conquest of the Albanian territories of Aetolia-Akarnania (1405), and seized Arta in 1416.[55] Many Albanians subsequently withdrew to Attica, Boeotia, the Peloponnese and the Venetian island of Corfu.[56]

It goes without saying that the Albanian activity discussed above can hardly be classed as banditry. These were full-blown military operations involving hundreds or even thousands of tribal warriors each time. The Albanians waged war, although often this amounted to large-scale brigandage, involving little direct confrontation.[57] To be sure, the sources that describe these events indicate that the Albanians practically lived off banditry, which was an integral part of their economic life. This is most clearly expressed in the *Chronicle of the Tocco* which states that they "robbed each

partes Blachia redemus". Et sic omnes pariter sunt reversi [….]; *Diplomatari de l'Orient català*, 159–161, no. 129, here at 160; Lock 2014, 146.

[51] John Kantakuzenos, *Histories*, I, 495–499; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, I, 544–545; Nicol 1984, 108–110; Synkellou 2008, 229–230. It is estimated that the victorious Byzantine troops rounded up some 300,000 oxen, 5,000 horses and 1,200,000 sheep that had been previously seized by Albanian bandits.

[52] John Kantakuzenos, *Histories*, II, 15 (Trans.: 97).

[53] Osswald 2007, 134–135; Jochalas 1971, 89–106.

[54] Osswald 2007, 135. For the title 'Ἀλβανιτοκτόνος' (the Albanian-slayer), which Thomas Preljubović used for himself (Εὐκαιρίαν γὰρ εὑρὼν ὁ Θωμᾶς τότε, τοὺς Ἀλβανίτας κακῶς καὶ ἀνηλεῶς αὐτοὺς ἐτυράννιζεν· ὃς καὶ Ἀλβανιτοκτόνος ἐπεθύμει γενέσθαι καὶ ὀνομάζεθαι), see *Chronicle of Ioannina*, 89.

[55] For Carlo Tocco, see Zečević 2014, 77–99; Nicol 1984, 168–188.

[56] Vranoussi 1998, 293–294; Nicol 1984, 189.

[57] Bartusis 1981, 398.

others' villages and *katuns*".[58] Undoubtedly, the Albanian tribesmen, much like the Vlachs, must have represented a potential threat to those travelling near their settlements.[59] There is, subsequently, every reason to believe that many of the unidentified bandits in our sources belonged to this particular ethnic group.

Concluding this revision of nomadic peoples engaged in banditry, it is worth making a brief reference to a marginal note on a copy of the *Universal History* of Diodoros Sikeliotes (Vat. gr. 130), which is thought to provide one of the earliest attestations of the presence of Gypsies in Europe. The reader, who lived in the last quarter of the twelfth century, reflects on a passage concerning thieves in Egypt: "Note this regarding the Egyptian thieves. The same happens today among the thieves who live in Macedonia and are called Egyptians [i.e. Gypsies]. They go around thieving and, when they are caught, they do not deny it but confess it, and ask to be paid for their thievery, which they call bold lad's wages".[60] Although this is the only explicit reference to Byzantine Gypsies as thieves and robbers, it would seem very reasonable to suppose that members of this group engaged in all sorts of criminal activity, including attacks on travellers,[61] as a good opportunity offered.

The Soldier

Soldiers, who were trained for a lifetime in the profession of arms, represented another important source of medieval banditry. Soldiers turned to banditry in two contexts. First, while on campaign, where, as noted in Chap. 3, the generally poor conditions of service—above all, the shortage of provisions or delays in pay—produced low morale and indiscipline. Under these circumstances, unruly or even desperate troops pillaged

[58] Ὁ τόπος ἦτον ἄπιστος· οἱ Ἀλβανῖται ὅλοι ἕνας τόν ἄλλον κούρσευεν χωρία καὶ κατοῦνες; *Chronicle of the Tocco*, 328, lines 1448–1449.

[59] Thus, according to the testimony of two Ragusan merchants in September 1278, on their way back from the mine district of Brskovo, they were attacked by Albanian bandits near Kotor; *Kancelariski spisi*, 17.

[60] ση(μείωσαι) περὶ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων κλεπτῶν. ὅπερ σήμερον γίνεται παρὰ τοῖς ἐν τῇ Μακεδονίᾳ οὖσι κλέπταις τοῖς λεγομένοις Αἰγυπτίο(ι)ς. οὗτοι γὰρ κλέπτοντες καὶ εὑρισκόμενοι, οὐκ ἀπαρνῶνται, ἀλλ' ὁμολογοῦντες, ζητοῦσι τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ κλεψίᾳ μισθὸν αὐτῶν. ὃν καλοῦσι παλικαριατικόν; Mazzucchi 1994, 182; Kaldellis 2015, 82.

[61] To be sure, before the end of the fourteenth century, when some groups appear in the sources to have been permanently settled in territories controlled by Venice in the Peloponnese, Gypsies were constantly on the move; see Soulis 1961.

villages, towns or the countryside, even on home territory, not just in search of food or supplies, but also of booty. There are several such episodes recorded in the sources.[62] Two examples can be mentioned here. First, we hear from the Byzantine historian George Pachymeres that around 1304 a Bulgarian man named John Choiroboskos collected, with Michael IV's permission, 1000 men to fight the Catalans and their Turkish allies, who at the time were wreaking havoc in Thrace. However, this army quickly degenerated into a company of brigands, who terrorized the area around Thessaloniki.[63]

The second episode is perhaps more telling. During the early stages of the civil war that broke out in Byzantium following the death of Emperor Andornikos III Palaiologos, we hear that those settled in the fortified town of Tzernomianou (Čermen), roughly 29 km west-north-west of Adrianople, at a ford on the Hebros River, caused no little harm through their pillaging.[64] "For nearly all night without pause, they were lurking around the walls and robbing those they happened to encounter".[65] Given that somewhat later, around 1345, Tzernomianou finally declared for John Kantakouzenos, it is safe to conclude that the marauders were the loyalist garrison of the town. These men escaped detection "not only because of their small numbers but also because of their experience; for they were very well practised in banditry".[66]

There can be no doubt that in both episodes presented above it is difficult to distinguish between soldier and brigand. But while the men of

[62] A few more examples are discussed by Bartusis 1981; Bartusis 1991, 77–79; See also Ardelean 2013, 34, for similar problems in late medieval Transylvania.

[63] [….] καὶ τῷ Μιχαὴλ προσελθὼν τιμὴν λαβὼν ἐπὶ Βουλγάροις τῆς σεβαστότητος, ἐπεὶ ἀνονητα ὅσα κατὰ Τούρκων και Ἀμογαβάρων Ῥωμαῖοι ὧρμων ποιεῖν, ἐκχώρησιν αὐτὸς λαβὼν παρὰ βασιλέως, περί που δὴ καὶ χιλίους συνάξας, πεζὸς σὺν πεζοῖς ἐπέχρα τοῖς Πέρσαις, καὶ κακῶς ἔδρα περὶ τὰ κατὰ τὴν Θεσσαλονίκην, οὐ Θεσσαλὸν πάντως ἀλλὰ Βουλγαρικὸν καὶ οἷον αὐτῷ σύνηθες. ἐντεῦθεν ἐκ πολλῆς ἀδείας οἱ Πέρσαι περικαθίσαντες ἐνδείᾳ ὕδατος αἱροῦσι τὸ φρούριον, καὶ τοὺς μὲν ὀλίγων ἀποδράντων ἔργον μαχαίρας ποιοῦσι, τὰ δ'ἐκεῖσε σκυλεύσαντες πῦρ ἐνιᾶσι καὶ τὸ πᾶν ἀφανίζουσιν; George Pachymeres, *De Michaele et Andronico Palaeologis*, II, 444–445; Laiou 1972, 191–192; Bartusis 1992, 78.

[64] Soustal 1991, 489; Asdracha 1976, 149. For an analysis of the civil war of 1341–1347, see Matschke 1971; see also Radić 2013, esp. 120–173. For an overview of the existing literature and a discussion of the social background of the conflict, see Malatras 2014.

[65] οἱ μέντοι ἐκ Τζερνομιάνου φρουρίου τινὸς οὐ πόῤῥω Διδυμοτείχου κατῳκισμένου, οὐ φαῦλά τινα ληστεύοντες ἑκάκουν. σχεδὸν γὰρ οὐ διέλιπον ἀεὶ νυκτὸς τὰ τείχη περιιόντες καὶ ληστεύοντες, οἷς ἂν ἐντύχομεν; John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 186–187 (Trans.: 242).

[66] ἐλάνθανον δὲ οὐ δι' ὀλιγότητα μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ δι' ἐμπειρίαν. ἦσαν γὰρ περὶ ληστείας κάλλιστα ἐξησκημένοι; John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 187 (Trans.: 242).

John Choiroboskos may have been driven to plunder and banditry out of absolute necessity, those from Tzernomianou are more likely to have found a way to turn military service into a profitable business. This is hardly surprising, if one bears in mind the social background from which soldiers were frequently recruited. Indeed, rulers considered it a natural solution to both the problem of banditry and the shortage of troops to recruit from the margins of society, for as a rule, brigands made excellent soldiers.[67] Thus, according to John Skylitzes, after the capture of Vodena, Basil II "deported its inhabitants to Boleron, installing in the city to replace them some Romans who are called *kontaratoi* [soldiers armed with spears], wild and murderous fellows, merciless bandits".[68] Likewise, the *Chronicle of Ioannina* reports that Thomas Preljubović took into his service "thieves, brigands, bandits and plunderers" for his war against the Albanian warlord Gjin Boua Spata.[69] The *Chronicle of the Tocco* uses the same terms when referring to Carlo I Tocco's war with Sgouras Boua. He hired "some plunderers to raid the place".[70] The same source reports that in 1422 the despots of Epiros "ordered brigands to grasp and take horses and things from the places of the Romans".[71] A few years later, in 1430, the Venetians, when defending Thessaloniki against the Ottomans, relied

[67] Bartusis 1981, 402–403.

[68] [….] παρέλαβε τὰ Βοδηνὰ καὶ τοὺς οἰκήτορας ταύτης εἰς τὸ Βολερὸν μετῴκησε, Ῥωμαίους δὲ ἀντ' αὐτῶν τῇ πόλει οἰκήτορας ἐναφῆκε τοὺς καλουμένους Κονταράτους, θηριώδεις ἀνθρώπους καὶ φονικούς, ἀνελεήμονάς τε καὶ ὁδοστάτας; John Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 352 (Trans.: 333 n. 194).

[69] Τότε ὁ Θωμᾶς προσῳκειοῦτο ἑαυτῷ κλέπτας, ῥιμπαραίους, λῃστᾶς καὶ κουρσάρους, καὶ κατὰ τῶν Ἀλβανιτῶν αὐτοὺς ἐξήγειρε [….]. Τότε ὁ Θωμᾶς βλέπων τὸ ἀμετάθετον τοῦ Σπάτα, ἐξήγειρεν μαζί του ὅλους τοὺς λῃστάς, ῥυμάρους, κουρσάρους κατὰ τῶν Ἀλβανιτῶν εἰς βοήθειάν του; *Chronicle of Ioannina*, 85 and 110 for the term 'ῥιμπαραίος' / 'ῥυμπαρικά' (*rymparaios / rymparika*), which Schirò thinks that comes from the Italian *rubare* = steal/ snatch, although an Albanian etymology (*röberia* = captivity) should not be discounted; Synkellou 2008, 272 and n. 266 defines 'ῥιμπαραῖοι' (*ribaraioi*) and 'ῥυμάροι' (*rymaroi*) as mercenary units of adventurers; see also Bartusis 1981, 403 n. 61. Nicol 1984, 145, suggests that these men were Serbs. The term 'κουρσάροι' (*koursaroi*) refers both to pirates and to 'robbers on land', thus in general to 'raiders', while 'κουρσεύω' (*kourseuo*) also means 'to plunder' as well as to 'invade'; Hendrickx–Sansaridou-Hendrickx 2013, 235.

[70] [….] ῥυμπαρικά ἐμάζωσεν τὸν τόπον νὰ ἀνατρέχουν; *Chronicle of the Tocco*, 290, line 962.

[71] Οἱ Δεσποτᾶτοι ἔμαθαν, ἐγνώρισαν τὸν τόπον, καὶ ἄρχισαν ρυμπαρικὰ νὰ δράκτουν, νὰ ἐπαίρνουν τὰ ἄλογα, τὰ πράγματα ἐκ τῶν Ρωμαίων τοὺς τόπους; *Chronicle of the Tocco*, 500, lines 3813–3815.

on brigands named *Tzetarioi*, who according to Ioannes Agnostes were brought together from different places.[72]

The other context in which we find soldiers acting as bandits is outside their military environment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, only a few such cases are reported in our sources.[73] The best-known example comes from the *Life of St Cyril Phileotes*, written by the monk Nikolaos Kataskepenos in the first quarter of the twelfth century.[74] Here the saint is said to have warned an Armenian friend against his decision to travel by land from the city of Derkos in Thrace to Varna, where his family was held for ransom (presumably by Pecheneg forces raiding in the Lower Danube region),[75] urging him to take a boat to return to Varna along with sailors who could be trusted.[76] However, the Armenian chose to cross the eastern slopes of the Haimos. On his way, he met two soldiers, who soon started enquiring about the purpose of his trip. When they found out that he was carrying a purse full of money, they killed him.[77]

[72] Ὡς δ' ἀνέβημεν, διημερεύειν ἐκεῖσε καὶ διανυκτερεύειν συνθέμενοι καὶ διέκριναν ἡμᾶς οἱ κρατοῦντες τῆς πόλεως, Λατίνους καὶ Ρωμαίους καὶ τοὺς τὴν ληστείαν μετερχομένους ἀναμὶξ στήσαντες (οὐ γὰρ πιστεύειν ἡμῖν καθαρῶς εἶχον) καὶ θάνατον τοῖς φρονήσουσι προδοσίαν ἠπείλησαν, τοὺς Τζεταρίους, ὡς ἡ κοινὴ φωνὴ τούτους ἐκάλει (λῃστῶν δ' ἦσαν οὗτοι σύνταγμα ἐκ διαφόρων τόπων συναθροισθέντες) φύλακας εἰς τοῦτ' ἐπιστήσαντες; John Anagnostes, *Diegesis*, 495; Messis 2010, 323 n. 1, believes that these *Tzetarioi* were mercenaries, mainly mustered among brigands; Hendrickx–Sansaridou-Hendrickx 2013, 235.

[73] Bartusis 1981, 396–397, refers to a number of episodes from other parts of the Byzantine Empire.

[74] See Angold 1995, 288–289.

[75] For the turmoil caused in the region by the Pechenegs, see Curta 2006, 295–310; Stephenson 2000, 93–98.

[76] According to St Cyril, the land route was so dangerous because of the bandits operating in the area.

[77] Ταύταις ταῖς παραινέσεσι καὶ ἄλλ αις πλείοσι παρῄνει τῷ ἐξ Ἀρμενίων Χριστιανῷ, οὗ μετὰ παρέλευσιν καιρῶν τινων κατὰ θείαν συγχώρησιν ᾐχμαλωτίσθησαν οἱ παῖδες μετὰ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτῶν. εἰς συμπάθειαν δὲ κινηθεὶς ὁ τῷ ὄντι συμπαθὴς ἠξίωσέ τινας τῶν φιλοχρίστων, καὶ δεδώκασιν αὐτῷ ἱκανὰ χρήματα εἰς ἀνάρρυσιν τῶν αἰχμαλωτισθέντων· ἃ καὶ λαβών ὁ ἐξ Ἀρμενίων Χριστιανὸς ἐπειρᾶτο πεζῇ ἀπελθεῖν εἰς Βάρνας. ἐκεῖθεν γὰρ ὥρμητο. ὁ δὲ ὅσιος παρῄνει αὐτῷ μὴ τοῦτο πρᾶξαι, μήπως ὑπὸ ληστῶν οὐ μόνον ἃ ἐπιφέρεται, ἀλλ ἀ καὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ζωὴν ἀπολέσῃ. καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτῷ· λογίζομαι ὅτι κρεῖσσόν σοί ἐστιν εἰσελθεῖν ἐν πλοίῳ ἀπὸ τῶν ὧδε ἀπερχομένων εἰς Βάρνας διὰ τὸ τοὺς ναυτικοὺς εἶναι γνωρίμους ἡμῖν καὶ πιστούς [….]. Ὡς οὖν κατῆλθεν ἐν τῷ χωρίῳ, εὗρε κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς δύο στρατιώτας πεζῇ μέλλοντας ἀπελθεῖν, ὡς ἐκεῖνοι ἔλεγον, εἰς τὸν Ζυγὸν ἔνθα ἦν καὶ ἡ ὁδὸς τοῦ ἐξ Ἀρμενίων Χριστιανοῦ. Ὡς δὲ ἀπῆλθε μετ' αὐτῶν ὀλίγων, ἤρξαντο ἐρωτᾶν αὐτὸν τίς τε εἴη καὶ πόθεν, τίνος τε χάριν τὸν ταχύν δρόμον ποιεῖται. Καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ἐξεῖπεν αὐτοῖς τὴν ἅπασαν ἀληθειαν. Μαθόντες δὲ ὅτι χρήματα ἐπιφέρεται, εὐθὺς ἐφόνευσαν αυτόν; *Life of Cyril Phileotes*, 126–127.

Another interesting incident is recorded in a decision of a patriarchal synod of 1330. There we hear that the ownership of an estate in the vicinity of Bera in Thrace (present-day Pheres, some 6 km west of the Hebros River)[78] had been disputed between a certain John Laskaris, his brother George Padyates and the latter's father-in law, the *domestikos* of the western themes George Strategos. Frustrated by the fact that his legal appeals were repeatedly denied, Laskaris decided to avenge his brother. He thus went to the village of Bokovikon and engaged the services of a sufficient number of men "who were armed". They then attacked and plundered the estate, injuring Padyates and killing one of his servants.[79] The armed men from Bokovikon are rightly thought to have been its "most unsavoury inhabitants".[80] Whether Bogomil heretics or not,[81] it is plausible to suggest that they were retired soldiers. For, as noted already,[82] veterans were usually prepared neither for the transition into agrarian life nor reentry into mainstream society. With their skill set, it was therefore easier to turn to banditry. This was probably also the case with a certain *kardosyanos* (Kardos Janos/Ioan), mentioned in a document issued by the Vicevoivode of Transylvania Lorandus Lepes in April 1417. That Ioan was a Transylvanian bandit, who had gathered around him a motley crew of villains and terrorized the townsmen of Sibiu, especially its German merchants. He was sometimes referred to as the 'the swordman', from which it is possible to infer some sort of military background.[83]

[78] Soustal 1991, 200–2001.

[79] ὁ δὲ πρὸς τοὺς τὴν Μποκοβίκον οἰκοῦντας ἀσεβεῖς ἀπελθὼν καὶ ἱκανοὺς ἐξ αὐτῶν ὡπλισμένους λαβὼν καὶ κατὰ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ κινηθεὶς ἐν τῷ εἰρημένῳ κτήματι τηνικαῦτα εὑρισκομένου αἴφνης ἐπεμπίπτει τούτῳ καὶ φονεύει ἕνα τινὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων αὐτοῦ, ὀνόματι Καλόθετον, αὐτὸ τοῦτο καὶ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ παρὰ μικρὸν ἑλθόντος παθεῖν, διαρπάσας τηνικαῦτα καὶ τὴν καθευρεθεῖσαν γεννηματικὴν εἴσοδον, καὶ τὸν οἶνον ἔτι δὲ καὶ τὰ προσόντα τοῖς ἐποίκοις τοὺ τοιούτου κτήματος, ἐφ' οἷς καὶ ἐπὶ πλέον ἀπαναιδευσάμενος καὶ ἀπαναισχυντῶν πρόσεισι τοῖς καθολικοῖς τῶν Ῥωμαίων κριταῖς, καὶ κρίσιν πάλιν ἀξαιτεῖται; *Acta et Diplomata*, 151–154, here at 153.

[80] Bartusis 1981, 392.

[81] Dimităr Angelov pointed out that another reference to Bokovikon mentioned here appears in a patriarchal document of 1316, where it is stated that the inhabitants of the village had been Bogomils since at least 1307: κατὰ τὸν τοῦ Ποκοβίκου τὸπον εὑρήσει, ἐφίσταται ἐκεῖσε, καὶ τινας ἡμέρας διαβιβάσας, ἐπείπερ γέγονεν αὐτῷ φανερὰ παρὰ τινων ἡ πλάνη τὼν εἰς τὸν τοιοῦτον τόπον εὑρισκομένων Βωγομίλων, ὑποχωρεῖ καὶ περί τινα μέρη τῆς Χαριουπόλεως κατοικεῖ; *Acta et Diplomata*, 59–60; Angelov 1958, 374–378.

[82] See our comments in Chap. 3.

[83] *Urkundenbuch*, 34–35, no. 1807; Hasan 2016, 27–29.

The Peasant

It has already been noted in a previous chapter of this study that during times of political and military unrest, which were usually marked by a decline of living conditions in rural areas, banditry became an attractive option for a segment of the peasant population.[84] Unfortunately, due to the sketchy reports in the sources, peasants—unlike shepherds or soldiers—are far more difficult to identify as brigands. Indeed, only a handful of known incidents can possibly be attributed to members of peasant society. One such episode is described by the *Life of St Germanos of Kosinitza*, a relatively unknown Byzantine saint, who around the middle of the ninth century moved from Palestine to Macedonia. According to his anonymous biographer, a divine vision prompted him to build a church on a mountain near Drama and then another one on Mount Matikia (Mount Pangaion). He proceeded to a remote area near the village of Tzernista and built a monastery (the Eikosiphoinissa or Kušnitsa) with the aid of workmen to whom the saint promised a reward of 100 gold coins. However, Germanos had not collected that amount by the time the work was completed. In their fury, the unpaid workers tied his hands behind his back and led him all the way to Drama, where they hoped they could ransom him. They started descending the steep north-western slopes of Mount Pangaion, and when they reached the confluence of the Aggitis and Strymon Rivers they came across a Byzantine embassy on the way to Serbia, headed by two officials named Neophytos and Nikolaos, who eventually agreed to pay the fee requested for the release of Germanos.[85] Undoubtedly, the workers mentioned in the *Life* were not 'professional' bandits but men who were pushed to crime by their relative poverty and limited opportunities for good employment.

Another example is provided by Matthew, bishop of Ephesos, who in a letter dated to June 1332 describes his journey from Constantinople to

[84] See for example: Sălăgean 2016, 38, concerning the situation in Transylvania following the Mongol invasion of 1241–1242; Theodoulos Magistros, 223 and Laiou-Thomadakis 1977, 263–264, for Thrace and Macedonia in the 1340s. For similar evidence coming from late fourteenth-century Banat, a border province of the Hungarian kingdom, see *Oklevelek*, 264–265, no. 154. In this case, it seems that the local Orthodox population took advantage of the Ottoman attacks to systematically plunder much of the region; Magina 2008, 290 n. 21.

[85] *Life of Germanos of Kosinitza*, 6–10. For a discussion, see Moutsopoulos 2003, 125–138. This embassy to Serbia is tentatively dated to 886; see Dujčev 1961, 53–60.

the metropolitan see of Vrysis (present-day Pinarhisar), some 80 km east of Adrianople in Thrace.[86] This was a primarily agricultural area which seems to have supplied Constantinople with food.[87] However, it was also notorious for its bandits, as Matthew found out later.[88] Thus on the second night of the trip, one of his companions went to buy wine from a local tavern, where he heard a number of robbers recounting tales of murder.[89] Although Matthew indicates that these men operated in the nearby forest, there can be no doubt that they were strongly tied to the local peasant community. Interestingly enough, in the same letter, Matthew offers some insight into what was believed to be the relationship between peasant life and banditry. For he notes that "having been born into the life of peasantry, the men of this village were neither capable nor willing to harm travellers".[90] Clearly then, in Byzantine minds banditry was not associated or connected in any way with this particular social group.

Additional evidence for the involvement of peasants in acts of banditry is provided by documents, mainly of a legal character, issued in the region of Banat. We hear, for instance, that in 1372 several serfs attacked the place where one of them, accused of robbery, was held. They were able to release him, but in the process they resorted to multiple acts of violence and looting.[91] Numerous other incidents are recorded, often involving the killing or theft of domestic animals.[92]

Noble Bandits

In addition to shepherds, soldiers and peasants, there were individuals operating at a higher social level who, in much the same way, engaged in acts of banditry. These were men who were not without means. On the contrary, they controlled considerable wealth and power, and committed

[86] Soustal 1991, 220–221.

[87] Matschke 2002, 469. Matthew tells us that the inhabitants of Vrysis were peasants and cattle farmers, but also artisans, meat sellers and grocers; Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 199, no. 64

[88] Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 193.

[89] Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 193; Belke 2002, 84–85; Karpozilos 1993, 535–536.

[90] τὸ δὲ χωρίον ἀνδρῶν μὲν ἦν ἡμέρων ἀγρότην βίον διαζῆν λαχόντων, αὐτόθεν κακόν τι πρᾶξαι τοὺς παριόντας οὔτ' εἰδότων οὔτε μὴν δυναμένων [….]; Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 193.

[91] *Oklevelek*, 121–122, no. 76.

[92] Magina 2014, 56–57 with several examples.

crimes which usually went unpunished because of the prominent role they played in the political and military affairs of their time. In western Europe, and particularly in late medieval England, where this distinctive type of criminal behaviour has been described as 'fur-collar crime', many such examples can be cited.[93] Although members of the nobility frequently committed felonious acts (murder, robbery, rape, arson etc.), they most often used their position to interfere with the course of justice and to extort land and money in a variety of ways.[94] Thus for instance, hired retainers would go out and beat a victim, and then require money to buy protection from future assault. They would also abduct travellers, who were only released after payment of ransom.[95] Overall, it appears that nobles provided the leadership for the majority of criminal gangs in medieval England, although it is clear that their criminal careers were usually sporadic rather than a persistent way of life, and their households served many other functions than criminal ones.

The limited evidence available to us suggests that Balkan dignitaries, high officials and powerful landlords often engaged in a very similar pattern of criminal behaviour. The case of John Laskaris who, as noted already, hired a number of armed men to plunder the estate of his brother in Thrace is typical. Numerous other examples are known from late medieval Banat, in the southern limits of the Hungarian kingdom, in the northern Balkans. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, members of the local nobility either instigated or were directly involved in acts of violence, including robbery, arson, the pillaging of estates and kidnapping. Although in many cases these crimes may be placed within the context of 'private wars', stemming from feuds between rival noble families, very often their motive was, quite simply, material gain.[96]

Undoubtedly, the best documented example of noble banditry is illustrated by the career of Momčilo, a Bulgarian bandit chief, who thanks to his own skilful manipulation of military power found his way into the highest echelons of Byzantine hierarchy during the early stages of the

[93] Hanawalt 1975; Reuter 2006, 55–56. See also Chap. 7.

[94] Hanawalt 1975, 2; McCall 1979, 104–105.

[95] Hanawalt 1975, 5–6.

[96] A typical case of upper-class crime, with striking similarities to that of Laskaris discussed above, is reported in 1493: the noble Francis Haraszty claimed that a year earlier the members of the Báthory family, accompanied by nearly 130 armed men, attacked two of his estates and caused damages of over 1000 florins. For a detailed discussion, see Magina 2014, esp. 51–52.

great civil war of 1341–1347. Two Byzantine sources, the histories of John Kantakouzenos and of Nikephoros Gregoras, provide the bulk of our information, although their accounts can be supplemented by a poem attributed to Michael Philes (c.1275–1345), and the *Düstūrnāme* ('Book of the Grand Vizier'), written around 1465 by the Ottoman poet-chronicler Enrevi.[97] From them we learn that from his youth Momčilo led a life of banditry on the Serbian-Bulgarian border, ambushing travellers. At the age of thirty he decided to change his life, and so he crossed the border to Byzantium, where he enrolled in the army of Andronikos III. However, he was unable to curb his longing for plunder and began ravaging the lands on both sides of the border, until fear of an offensive against him prompted him to flee, this time into Serbia, where he spent some time.[98] Then, in 1343 or, according to Gregoras, in the summer of 1344, Momčilo arrived in Thrace and offered his services to John Kantakouzenos, who was already involved in the civil war. After capturing the city of Peritheorion (Anastasiopolis),[99] we are told that Kantakouzenos, recognizing his bravery and his abilities in banditry and guerilla warfare, entrusted to him the command of the fortresses, villages and inhabitants of the region of Merope in the Rhodope, which had voluntarily submitted to him.[100] Soon Momčilo was able to raise locally a force of some 300 cavalrymen and 5000 foot soldiers, who Kantakouzenos describes as brigands.[101] Their assignment was to destroy all the neighbouring fortresses which had not yet submitted to Kantakouzenos. He and his army also appear to have participated, along with Omur, emir of Aydin, in the siege and capture of Komotini.[102]

Gregoras offers a slightly different version of events. He suggests that both Byzantines and Bulgarians in this part of Thrace still distrusted him because of his previous attacks.[103] Thus Momčilo preferred to consider

[97] Manuel Philes, *Poems*, II, 240–244, no. 237; Enveri, *Düstūrnāme*; Lemerle 1957, 167ff; Zachariadou 1999, 40–41. In general for the histories of Gregoras and Kantakouzenos, see Neville 2018, 243–248 and 266–272.

[98] John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 402–403; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, II, 702–703.

[99] Soustal 1991, 394–395.

[100] John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 402, who also believed that the nomadic population of that region would be favourably disposed towards a leader "of the same race"; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, II, 703; Bartusis 1980, 207; Gkartzonika 2012, 514, 527. For the location of Merope, see Soustal 1991, 354; Asdracha 1976, 7, 29.

[101] [….] ἐξ ὧν οὐκ ὀλίγη χεὶρ συνελέγετο λῃστρική; John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 403.

[102] Enveri, *Düstūrnāme*, 101; Lemerle 1957, 169–170.

[103] Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, II, 704.

himself as a "subject-ally and slave-volunteer" of Kantakouzenos.[104] He subsequently attacked the enemies of the latter, secretly aiming at his independence, personal profit and a bandit salary for his followers.[105] Over time, we are told that he was able to muster an army of 2000 horsemen, who reportedly came from the margins of Bulgarian and Serb society.[106]

The two main narrative accounts agree that soon thereafter Momčilo decided to change sides and serve the regency in Constantinople. Gregoras adds that the empress Anna (of Savoy) honoured him with the title of *despot*.[107] Effectively, he was given the freedom to build a large power and economic base for himself, as well as the opportunity to mask his activity under a mantle of legitimacy. Somewhat later, he is reported to have marched against the port of Abdyra, where he destroyed all fifteen of Omur's ships, and then to have ambushed Kantakouzenos near Mosinopolis, in the hinterland of Peritheorion.[108] According to Kantakouzenos, after his victory Momčilo sent an embassy to Constantinople, requesting a reward for his services. Simultaneously, he approached Kantakouzenos, begging forgiveness for the ingratitude he had shown to him. Unable to do otherwise at such a critical moment, the emperor forgave him, and honoured him with the title of *sevastokrator*, which Momčilo seemed to prefer to that of *despot*.[109] And indeed, for a time he remained loyal to the emperor. However, before long he placed himself again under the regency, attacking a number of cities controlled by Kantakouzenos in Chalkidike. But Momčilo, we are told, had an agenda of his own. For he now considered himself capable of establishing his own hegemony, and thus declared his independence from both Anna and Kantakouzenos, bringing most towns and fortresses in the Merope region under his power.[110]

[104] [….] σύμμαχος ὑπόσπονδος καὶ δοῦλος ἐθελοντὴς εἵλετο λέγεσθαι τε καὶ εἶναι Καντακουζηνοῦ τοῦ βασιλέως; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, II, 704.

[105] ἀλλ' αὐτονομίᾳ χρώμενον κρυφᾳ κατὰ τὴν συμφυᾶ συνήθειαν τοῖς ἐκείνου προσβάλλειν ἐχθροῖς, ἐπὶ κέρδεσιν ἑαυτοῦ τε καὶ ὅσοι ξυν γε αὐτῷ μισθοῦ λῃστρικοῦ στρατεύεσθαι εἵλοντο; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, II, 704.

[106] Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, II, 704.

[107] Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, II, 704; John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 421. Kantakouzenos, in fact, claims that Momčilo received the title of *despot* somewhat later; see however Gkartzonika 2012, 528.

[108] John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 428–430; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, II, 705–706.

[109] John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 431–432.

[110] Μομτζίλος δὲ ἐκ τοῦ πρὸς ἀλλήλους τῶν Ῥωμαίων πολέμου ηὐξημένος καὶ μέγας ἤδη γεγενημένος καὶ νομίσας ἑαυτῷ ἀρκεῖν πρὸς τὸ συστήσασθαι ἡγεμονίας ἰδίᾳ, ὁμοίως

By 1345 Omur returned to Thrace and, along with Kantakouzenos, planned a campaign against Momčilo. The latter is said to have sent an embassy to Kantakouzenos, asking once again for forgiveness. At the same time, however, he began preparations for war, raising some 1500 horsemen. The two sides met before the walls of Peritheorion in June 1345. At the battle's conclusion, Momčilo and most of his army were slain. Soon all of Merope was again in the hands of Kantakouzenos, who allowed Momčilo's widow to return with all of her property to Bulgaria.[111]

Momčilo's career was undoubtedly spectacular. From a mere highwayman he became a powerful warlord and a high-ranking dignitary. But even so, he made no effort to disguise the true nature of his activity. He and his followers are thus described as brigands, who saw their involvement in the civil war as an opportunity to make profit. Although the details are missing, our sources clearly suggest that in the area he controlled in the Rhodopes, Momčilo had effectively created a private army that ran 'protection rackets'. He was subsequently feared and mistrusted by the local population. In any case, he made a sufficient impression on his contemporaries to become an important figure in the south Slavic folk tradition, where, perhaps unsurprisingly, he is transformed from an outlaw into a hero-fighter against the Turks.[112]

Several other local commanders, especially from the eleventh century onwards, carved out careers comparable to that of Momčilo. They usually appear in the sources during periods of general unrest, and almost all of them illustrate the shifting loyalties, the opportunism and the irregularity of Balkan frontier administration.[113] Although, unlike Momčilo, they are never called 'bandits', their actions can clearly be compared to the criminal pattern described above. This is certainly the case with Dobromir Chrysos, a Vlach by birth, who is first mentioned in the 1190s in the context of the Vlach-Bulgarian rebellion. Niketas Choniates reports that Chrysos and his 500 men were initially on the emperor's side. He was then suspected of leaning towards his fellow Vlachs and of wanting to rule independently, and was thus put in prison. Upon his release, around 1196, he was

Καντακουζηνοῦ τε ἀφίστατο τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ Ἄννης τῆς βασιλίδος [….] καὶ ὁμοίως ἑκατέροις ἐπολέμει, καὶ πόλεις καὶ κώμας ὑπεποιεῖτο; John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 436–437.

[111] John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, II, 530–534; Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, II, 727–729; Enveri, *Düstūrnāme*, 101; Bartusis 1980, 208–210; Soulis 1995, 274–276; Gkartzonika 2012, 540–542.

[112] Gjuzelev 1967, 91–109; Zagklis 1966; Bartusis 1980, 217–218. See also Chap. 7.

[113] See for example *Životi kraljeva*, 345–346; Bartusis 1980, 201.

appointed commander of Strumica, but he is soon reported to have begun raiding neighbouring territories in Macedonia. Emperor Alexios III (1195–1203) marched against him in spring 1197, besieged him for two months, and then returned to the capital, allowing Dobromir to consolidate his authority in the area. Following another unsuccessful campaign in autumn 1197, the emperor sued for peace and recognized Dobromir's rights to lands between the Strymon and Vardar rivers, including Strumica and the fortress of Prosek. He was additionally offered a Byzantine bride, the daughter of the *protostrator* Michael Kamytzes.[114]

Nevertheless, as Paul Stephenson has pointed out, for men like Dobromir the patronage of the Byzantine emperor was no longer considered preferable to his enmity, his gifts of tribute and titles no longer sufficiently attractive as alternatives to booty which might be gained by rebellion or invasion.[115] Thus around 1201 he launched a series of fresh raids into Macedonia, Thessaly, central Greece and the Peloponnese, where he reportedly incited many revolts.[116] In the end, Alexios III was able to tame Dobromir by marrying him to his own granddaughter. Dobromir was then forced to accept a new treaty that allowed him to retain control only of Prosek and the surrounding countryside.[117]

Once again, there can be no doubt that in the territories controlled by Dobromir his rule was largely based on terror and intimidation. There is every reason to believe that he used the techniques of extortion on the local peasant or pastoral population to build a reservoir of wealth for himself and his followers. His income may have been supplemented by exacting tolls from travellers or by robbing the traffic on the two arterial routes that run near Prosek, the Morava-Axios highway and the *Via Egnatia*.[118] In all likelihood, this was a typical practice among powerful Balkan magnates and *toparchs*, who must have assumed that a certain amount of

[114] Niketas Choniates, *History*, 487, 491, 502–508 (Trans.: 267, 270, 277–280); Madgearu 2017, 110, 117; Stephenson 2000, 306–307; Fine 1987, 29.

[115] Stephenson 2000, 308.

[116] Niketas Choniates, *History*, 533–535 (Trans.: 293–294).

[117] A few years later, perhaps around 1205, his possessions were taken over by the Bulgarians. Dobromir is not mentioned again in the sources; see Madgearu 2017, 117; Fine 1987, 86–87.

[118] For toll exactions (the so-called *diavatikon* or *poriatikon*) along the *Via Egnatia* during the late Byzantine period, see Oikonomides 1996, 15–16. Illegal tolls were also levied in several other parts of the Balkans. For instance, in 1360, complaints were lodged against a nobleman who exacted such a toll on an episcopal estate at Turea in northern Transylvania; see *Documenta Romaniae Historica*, 431–433, no. 288.

'criminal' activity was involved in being a noble and that it would be tolerated as long as it did not become excessive.[119]

Apart from the two cases considered above, it may be worth remarking that the Dubrovnik archives provide sufficient evidence for the involvement of members of the local nobility into acts of banditry. Thus, several *knezi*, *vojvodi* or men working for them are accused of robbery, extortion and violence.[120] Some of these incidents may well have stemmed from personal feuds.[121] In any case, the transgressors usually escaped punishment altogether. Clearly, the bulk of the society would not regard their crimes in the same light as those of 'professional bandits'. Since there was often a thin line between legitimate exercise of authority and crime, many of their illegal acts could thus be rationalized.

The Bandits' Methods of Operation

Having categorized Balkan bandits according to their social or professional background, it is now time to turn to their methods of operation. Pieced together, the fragmentary information supplied by the written sources can help us understand with some accuracy how they planned and carried out their activities. We begin our analysis by pointing out that most bandits appear to have operated locally, that is, within a very specific region, with which they were well acquainted, and where they could activate a network of support. This is demonstrated very clearly in the case of the Bobani Vlachs who, for the most part, committed their robberies near their settlements or in areas adjacent to them.[122] This is also true for shepherd-bandits belonging to transhumant communities. They may have covered long distances between their seasonal pastures, but, being cyclical in its annual repetition, theirs was a journey on very familiar territory.

The next step was to locate a suitable target. This was achieved in two ways: either on the spot, where a target, for instance, a caravan, would be watched from a safe distance until it was ambushed, or by gathering information in advance. A good example of how the latter worked in practice is

[119] Hanawalt 1975, 2.

[120] See for instance, *Lam. de foris*, V, 149; *Lam. de foris*, XX, 80; *Lam. de foris*, XXI, 124; *Lam. de foris*, XXXVI, 224v. See also our comments earlier in this chapter.

[121] As in the case in 1425, when the *vojvoda* Sandalj Hranić organized an attack on the caravan of a man from Ston, who allegedly owed him money. He thus seized two cartloads of wax and 12 litres of silver; *Cons. rog.*, III, 252

[122] Kurtović 2012, 83 and our comments above.

offered by the letter of Mathew Gavalas, bishop of Ephesos, who, as noted already, describes his journey from Constantinople to the town of Vrysis in Thrace in 1332. The whole region where Matthew and his party were travelling was notorious for its bandits, and in fact we hear that the latter could obtain all the information they needed from the local villagers or even from the travellers themselves.[123]

As one might expect, Balkan bandits usually operated in groups. These varied in size, from a handful to several dozen, depending on the scope of their targets, the skills and abilities of their leaders, the support network available to them, or the general socio-political conditions prevailing in the area in which they were active. Obviously, more members meant more shares of the loot to divide, but also greater security during and following an attack. In the sources we hear of groups consisting of up to fifty people,[124] but in general it seems that the average band numbered no more than ten to fifteen members.

The bandits were now ready to attack their victims. An ambush was usually set up at a densely forested area or a narrow pass, quite likely by placing a wall of logs in the middle of the road. In some cases, however, these passes were already blocked with fortifications. Thus, during the early stages of their trip, Matthew and his companions lost the way and wandered for a while in a forest, where they came across the ruins of an ancient wall above a gorge. Matthew describes this place as "a natural habitat for bandits".[125] Later, the party reached another narrow passage in the forest. There they saw a number of earthen mounds with crosses on top, which they took for the graves of robbed and slain travellers.[126]

The surviving sources offer specific information on several locations considered suitable for banditry (Fig. 5.2). By far the most important was the area around Trebinje in Bosnia. The local section of the *Via Drine*, a particularly important trading road leading from Dubrovnik to Niš,

[123] Indeed, bandits and travellers met at places like the local taverns. Thus one of Matthew's companions encountered native robbers and murderers at the innkeeper's; Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 193.

[124] Thus Matthew and his companions heard that fifty local bandits were preparing an ambush against them; Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 194. Moreover, in one of the lawsuits against Bobani Vlachs recorded in the Dubrovnik archives, forty four people in all were accused of participating in a robbery in August 1456; *Lam. de foris*, XXIX, 251v.

[125] [....] εἰς φάραγγά τινα βαθεῖα ἐμπίπτομεν λῃσταῖς αὐτόχρημα καὶ ἀνδροφόνοις καταγωγήν; Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 193.

[126] Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 197.

became the site of hundreds of robberies in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[127] The narrow valley of Konavle, squeezed between the Adriatic Sea and Mount Sniježnica, is another place that features prominently in reports of attacks by brigands in the late medieval period. Elmedina Duranović has shown that these attacks tended to become much more frequent during times of political and social upheaval, as in the 1420s, when the city of Dubrovnik tried to incorporate Konavle into its territory, thereby coming into conflict with the local (Bosnian) nobility.[128] A particularly dangerous locale for travellers was Kameno Brdo ('rocky cliff'), situated on a busy route connecting Cernica and Bileća in present-day Herzegovina, where between 1413 and 1473 twelve highway robberies were recorded. In all twelve cases, the victims were Ragusan merchants and the bandits were inhabitants of the surrounding area.[129] Further east, the Strymon valley had a reputation of being thoroughly infested with bandits, and indeed several attacks are known to have taken place there.[130] By the same token, pirates on the Danube often set their ambushes at the 'Iron Gates', where that river cuts for some 150 km through the Transylvanian Alps and the Haimos mountain range.[131] Interestingly

[127] Duranović 2017, 39–57 for a detailed survey.

[128] Duranović 2017, 58–67. A good discussion of Dubrovnik's conflict with the Bosnian nobility over Konavle is offered by Harris, 2006, 71–76.

[129] Kurtović 2011b.

[130] See for example Theodore Metochites, *Presbeutikos*, 98; *Actes de Docheiariou*, 172–178, no. 24. The Strymon was most likely the place where Slav bandits attacked and captured St Gregory the Decapolite in the 830s: [….] κατήντησεν ἐπί τινα ποταμὸν ἐν ᾧ Σκλαβήνοις λῃσταῖς περιέπεσεν ἐπὶ λέμβου τὰς τοῦ ποταμοῦ παραμειβομένοις ὄχθας καὶ τὰ προσπίπτοντα τῶν πλοίων λῃϊζομένοις; *Life of Gregory the Decapolite*, 86; Dimitroukas 1997, 350–351. Great danger was also lurking at the mouth of the Nestos River. From the same *Life*, 114, written by Ignatios the Deacon around the 850s, we hear that the *protokangellarios* Georgios and the monk Anastasios, who were travelling from Thessaloniki to Constantinople, decided to continue their journey from Maronoia by sea, despite the danger of piracy.

[131] See for example, the *Life of Vlassios of Amorion*, 622–623. The *Life* was written in the 930s or 940s and preserved in a single tenth-century manuscript; Efthymiadis 2011, 117–118; Kazhdan 2006, 222–225. It must be noted that from the second half of the ninth century the route connecting central Europe to the Balkans appears to have involved larger stretches of the Lower Danube, although, as shown by the *Life of St Clement of Ochrid* (where we are told that after their expulsion from Moravia in 885, Clement, Naum and Angelarios came to the Danube from the north, crossed the river on a makeshift raft and, moving alongside it, eventually reached Belgrade), travelling alongside the Danube may have been as common as travelling on it; see *Life of Clement of Ochrid*, 95, 96–97; McCormick 2011, 556.

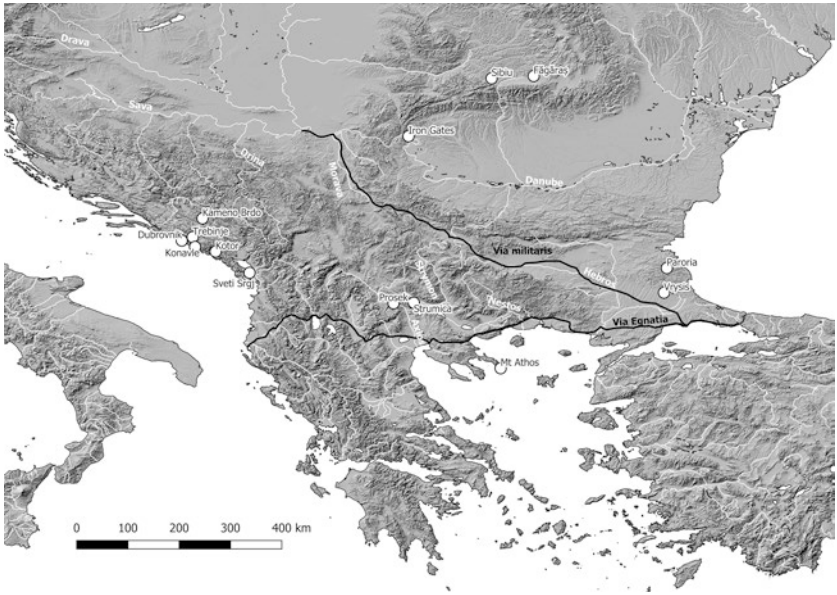

Fig. 5.2 Sites that feature prominently in incidents of banditry (ninth–fifteenth centuries)

enough, the small number of gold and copper coins of Basil I (867–886) and Leo VI (886–912) found near the city of Orșova in the Romanian Banat, just above the 'Iron Gates', have been associated by some scholars with the activities of local bandits and pirates, and thus serve as a reminder of the dangers faced by medieval travellers in that area.[132]

The evidence from Matthew's letter would suggest that for some travellers an encounter with bandits almost certainly meant death. The truth is, however, that other sources only rarely mention specific cases of such killing.[133] On the other hand, it seems that bandits often injured their

[132] Kovács 1989, 51, nos. 260, 263; Musteaţă 2008, 149, no. 36 and 152, no. 65; Simeonova 2006, 139–140. Nevertheless, Kovács ignored the existence of many such coins in Magyar graves inside Hungary as well—and those cannot be attributed to either bandits or pirates.

[133] We have already referred to the Armenian friend of St Cyril Phileotes, who was robbed and killed by two soldiers en route to Varna. In another incident, known from a Slavonic charter dated to 1375/6, bandits attacked the men of Stefan Dušan in the vicinity of Strumica, killing them and stealing their horses; *Odabrani spomenici*, 170; Popović 2012,

victims. Thus, several Bosnian and Dalmatian Vlachs are known to have been prosecuted on that charge.[134] Numerous other examples are recorded in the Dubrovnik archives. To mention but a few: in September 1419 a servant was robbed and wounded in Gacko;[135] the same year a certain Vratko Vraničić was accused of beating and robbing a man in Glavska;[136] in June 1433 Vlatko Tvrtković along with two couriers, Dobrašin and Mirosav, filed a lawsuit against a man who allegedly robbed and wounded them at Cernica;[137] and in May 1443 Puljko Branković, another courier, filed a similar lawsuit for injuries he suffered at Skrobotno.[138] Similar evidence is provided by legal documents involving violent crimes that were committed in the region of Banat. Thus in 1335, while returning from the fair in the village of Seceani, Paul Crispus and Paul Saar were attacked by four people, who stole all their possessions and severely injured them.[139] Nine years later, a serf from Remetea was kidnapped, robbed and tortured for several days by a certain Michael Parvus and his companions.[140] In another instance, Gregorius of Davidhaza, the Vice-comes of Timiș, was accused of attacking and injuring three men from Ictar, who were stripped of their weapons, clothes, supplies and livestock.[141] Additional information can be found in hagiographical sources. For instance, the biographer of John of Rila tells us that the saint was driven away from the mountain where he had begun his ascetic life—perhaps the Vitoša—by robbers who fell upon him and beat him severely, while from the Greek *Life of St*

167. Moreover, the Dubrovnik archives record the murder and robbery of a courier named Juraš in the area near Trebinje in 1427, as well as the murder of two servants, around 1446 and 1492 respectively; *Lam. de foris*, VII, 183v; *Div. not.*, XXX, 154v; *Div. canc.*, LXXXVII, 153v; Kurtović 2014, 253, 259, 260. For several other examples from Bosnia, see Duranović 2017, 186–192. For examples from medieval Transylvania, see *Documente istorice slavo-române*, 157–158, no. 164; *Documente privitoare*, 81–82, no. 56; Rădvan 2010, 207–208; Hasan 2016, 29–31.

[134] See for instance *Lam. pol.*, II, 221; *Lam. de foris*, XXIV, 142; Kurtović 2012, 27, 35.

[135] *Lam. de foris*, IV, 82v.

[136] *Lam. de foris*, IV, 80.

[137] *Lam. de foris*, X, 11.

[138] *Lam. de foris*, XVI, 217.

[139] Magina 2014, 54–55.

[140] *Krassó vármegye története*, 14–15, no. 16.

[141] Magina 2014, 59.

Romylos of Vidin we hear that the bandits in the area of Paroria in Thrace used to thrust fire-hardened irons into the monks' intestines.[142]

As noted already, there was a high degree of variation in the types of goods that were stolen by bandits. They included money,[143] luxury goods such as textiles,[144] precious metals and jewellery,[145] domestic animals (mainly cattle and horses),[146] wax,[147] grain and salt,[148] weapons,[149] tools[150] and other personal belongings of their victims.[151] However, bandits also took prisoners, which they held for ransom or sold into slavery. The evidence for this in the sources abounds: Vlach and Slav communities in

[142] *Life of John of Rila*, 52. For the *Life* in general, see Ivanov 1917. For St Romylos, see *Life of Romylos of Vidin*, 124 (Trans.: 32–33).

[143] For example, *Lam. de foris*, I, 47 (two men accused of stealing money, bread and cheese near Popovo); *Lam. de foris*, III, 141 (loss of money, horses and quantities of salt, in addition to physical injuries); *Lam. de foris*, IV, 76 (loss of money and other goods near Trebinje); *Lam. de foris*, VII, 235v (loss of 12 *perpera*); *Lam. de foris*, X, 1v (loss of 96 *ducats*); *Lam. de foris*, XI, 189v (loss of 16 *ducats*, one *perperon*, horses, weapons, a goat and 100 litres of wax); *Lam. de foris*, XX, 144v (loss of a horse, weapons and five *perpera*); *Lam. de foris*, XX, 201 (loss of five *perpera*, a knife and a sword). Several other cases are recorded in the archives.

[144] For instance, *Lam. de foris*, IV, 57v; *Lam. de foris*, IV, 284v; *Lam. de foris*, V, 149; *Lam. de foris*, IX, 48; *Lam. de foris*, XX, 80; *Lam. de foris*, XXIV, 10v.

[145] *Listine*, I, 299; *Cons. rog.*, III, 252; *Lam. pol.*, II, 231. Several examples are presented by Duranović 2017, 174–177.

[146] A few examples: *Monumenta ragusina*, 114–115, 118 (horse); *Lam. de foris*, II, 2 (ox); *Lam. de foris*, IV, 184 (ox and cow); *Lam. de foris*, V, 172v (horse and four goats); *Lam. de foris*, XVII, 82v (six sheep); *Lam. de foris*, XI, 189v (horse and other valuables). See also Duranović 2017, 128–159. For the theft of horses in particular, see Kurtović 2014, 295–308 and the table "Pljačke konja i konjske opreme", 645–700.

[147] *Lam. de foris*, II, 162v; *Lam. de foris*, IV, 284v; *Lam. de foris*, XVIII, 3v.

[148] Grain: *Lam. de foris*, IV, 67; *Lam. de foris*, VII, 80; *Lam. de foris*, XIII, 57; *Lam. de foris*, XVII, 82v; *Lam. de foris*, XIX, 160v. Salt: *Lam. de foris*, I, 30v; *Lam. de foris*, III, 141; *Lam. de foris*, V, 18.

[149] For instance, *Lam. de foris*, XI, 189v; *Lam. de foris*, XVII, 68; *Lam. de foris*, XX, 201. Duranović 2017, 177–183.

[150] *Test. not.*, IX, 127; *Lam. de foris*, IV, 292; *Lam. de foris*, XIII, 167.

[151] See Kurtović 2012, 84, 96.

Bosnia[152] and Macedonia,[153] Turkish pirates,[154] and bandits of various other kinds[155] were involved in a very profitable trade that started to

[152] To mention but a few examples: *Lam. de foris*, XXXVII, 64v (lawsuit in 1465 for the abduction of a blacksmith's servant); *Lam. de foris*, XXXVII, 266 (lawsuit in 1466 for the abduction of a servant who was subsequently sold to the Turks for 8 *ducats*); *Lam. de foris*, XXXIX, 52 (lawsuit in 1467 for the abduction of two brothers, a sister and their mother, who were subsequently sold to the Turks); *Lam. de foris*, XXXX, 92; (lawsuit in 1468 for the abduction of a maid who was sold to the Turks); *Lam. de foris*, XL, 117v (lawsuit in 1468 for an attempted abduction). More examples are presented by Dinić in the three volumes of *Iz Dubrovačkog arhiva* and by Duranović 2017, 193–199.

[153] Thus while travelling in eastern Macedonia (along the Strymon valley), Theodore Metochites, who led a Byzantine delegation to Serbia in 1299, notes that the natives in that region are cattle and goat thieves, who often ambush, plunder and enslave travellers on the borders and in the mountains: [….] ταύρων ἠδ' αἰγῶν ἁρπακτῆρες, οὐδ' εἰς προῦπτον οὐδ' ἐπίδημοί τινες οὐδ' ἐπίδηλοι, ἀλλ' ἐν ὄρεσιν ἐπ' ἐρημίας ἀνδρῶν τε ὁδιτῶν καὶ βοσκημάτων ἐλλοχηταί τε και λωποδύται καὶ ἀνδραποδισταί [….]; Theodore Metochites, *Presbeutikos*, 98. For the route followed by Metochites' party, see Malamut 1996, 165–175.

[154] *Life of Savas (Theodosios)*, 31–32, 65–67; *Life of Savas (Domentijan)*, 136–138, 183–184 (two episodes reported in St Savas' *Lives*: in the first, the young prince was allegedly captured by pirates en route by boat from Vatopedi to the Great Lavra. With the help of an elderly monk, Savas managed to make good his escape, although for the release of his companions a heavy ransom was demanded. Elsewhere, the two *Lives* inform us about attacks on the monasteries of Ksiropotamos and Karakallou, which occurred during Savas' stay at Athos, that is, between 1192–1205/6. In the course of these attacks, all the monks were rounded up and sold as slaves); *Actes de Dionysiou*, 8 (a series of raids on Mount Athos launched by Turkish pirates, who took many captives. These events are recorded on a document dated to 1345); *Actes de Docheiariou*, 172–178, no. 24 (four Athonite monks captured by pirates in the Strymonic Gulf); *Life of Dionysios of Athos*, 58 (capture of the abbot of the monastery of Philotheou Theodosios and several other monks in 1348. They were sold as slaves in Bursa but were later ransomed by pious Christians); *Life of Gregory Palamas*, 535–536 (capture of Gregory Palamas and his companions near Kallipolis). The events which led to his captivity, as well as his impression of his Turkish captors, Palamas himself describes in a long letter that survives in three manuscripts; see Sahas 1980; see also Arnakis 1951, 104–118. Furthermore: *Life of Dionysios of Athos*, 64–65 (Turkish raid on the Athonite monastery of Dionysou, during which all of its monks were enslaved. They were ransomed by the founder of the monastery, St Dionysios); *Life of Niphon*, 19, 26 (capture of the monk Ioannikios and his companions—other monks trying to collect the sum of money required for paying the ransom); *Life of Gregory of Sinai*, 368 (Gregory was forced to leave the Holy Mountain because of the incursions of Turkish brigands and pirates, who found the hermitages an easy hunting ground, ambushing monks and carrying them off as slaves). For several other examples see Živojinović 1980, 112–114. For a discussion, see also Oikonomides 1997, 6–7; Mergiali-Sacha 2010.

[155] See for example the *Life of Vlasios of Amorion*, 622–623, where we hear that Vlasios' travel companion (the saint had embarked on a trip to Rome) sold him into slavery in Bulgaria. In this connection, see Gjuzelev 1968, 3–31. In the *Life of Nikon Metanoeite*,

increase in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[156] Slaves were exported from the Balkan hinterland, mainly by Ragusan merchants, and sold to Italian (Venetian and Florentine) traders in exchange for foodstuffs or woollen cloth.[157] The Dubrovnik archives indicate that men and women were also sold to the Turks.[158] Many of the slaves captured in Bosnia were (or were sold as) Bogomil heretics or 'Patarins', and as such could be legitimately enslaved, since the Catholic Church held the position that it was lawful to forcefully capture those who practised idolatry, because this would allow them to be taken to civilized countries and, through the sacrament of baptism, be received into the grace of God.[159] The main Bosnian slave market was the town of Drijeva, on the left bank of the Neretva River, where Italian ships stopped regularly to stock up on various goods.[160]

238–239, we hear that peasants in the Peloponnese were threatened by bandits who pillaged the countryside and kidnapped free persons to sell as slaves. For Genoese merchants bringing to Genoa and selling as slaves Byzantine boys and girls, see Laiou 1972, 184, 185. For the sale of Greek prisoners as slaves by the Catalans, see Verlinden 1955, 322. For the Latin bandits who in 1362 held for ransom Manuel Metochites in the Peloponnese, see Manuel Raul, *Letters*, 149–153, no. 6.

[156] Several reasons have been suggested for this. The political instability and growing insecurity in large parts of the Balkans during the Ottoman invasions in the second half of the fourteenth century was certainly one of them. These invasions seem to have spurred a wave of immigration, especially to the Adriatic coast. The lack of manpower following the advent of the Black Death may have also played a significant role. For a discussion, see Pinelli 2008, 62.

[157] Pinelli 2008; McCormick 2001, 763–777; Solovjev 1946; Budak 1985; Budak 2000; Krekić 1989; Dorin 2012, 252; Duranović 2014. With an edict issued in 876 (and renewed several times in the tenth century), Venice tried to prohibit slave trade. In particular, the edict targeted Venetian merchants who purchased slaves abducted by pirates and bandits in order to market them; see *Urkunden*, I, 5, no. 7; Rotman 2009, 79–80.

[158] See our comments above. Numerous examples are contained in the third volume of *Iz Dubrovačkog arhiva*.

[159] Pinelli 2008, 60–61. Indeed, in a lawsuit filed in Dubrovnik in 1393, three girls begged for mercy because they were baptized Christians born of Christian parents, whereas their Catalan owner claimed that they had been sold to him as Patarines by a Ragusan merchant. The three girls were eventually set free; *Div. canc.*, III, 117; *Iz Dubrovačkog arhiva*, III, 63, no. 161, 64–65, no. 163. It may be worth remarking that in 1416 the authorities of Dubrovnik decided to prohibit the sale of slaves in the city unless they were intended for local employment. Nevertheless, the trade did not halt and continued to be profitable; see for example *Cons. maius* I, 26; *Iz Dubrovačkog arhiva*, III, 89–90, no. 200. See also Krekić 1987, 309–317; Popović-Radenković 1959, 203. For the Bosnian Bogomils, see now Stoyanov 2016, 576–584; Šanjek 2016, 165–182; Hašimbegović 2003, 39–47.

[160] Dinić 1938, 109–147; Budak 2000, 756. Another significant market was the port of Brštanik in Bosnia. Elsewhere along the Adriatic coast, Zadar, Split and Kotor also represented important slave centres.

With the exception of slaves, practically nothing is known about the bandits' attempts to dispose of stolen goods. As noted above, there can be no doubt that some of these goods were intended for personal use. This was certainly the case with cattle animals, which were usually seized by Vlach and Albanian shepherds. A horse could be sold in the hinterland of Dubrovnik for anything between 10-30 *perpera*, sometimes even more;[161] an ox around 5-8 *perpera*.[162] Luxury items, such as silk, spices and perfumes, which were regularly transported by Venetian caravans along the Dyrrachion-Constantinople highway (or by diplomatic missions along several Balkan routes), had a much higher value.[163] Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that in the countryside specialized stolen goods were generally hard to get rid of safely.[164]

The 'Bandit Network'

We have seen in a previous section of this study how members of bandit groups often retained strong kingship ties, which were essential for the security and survival of the band.[165] The 'operational core' of these groups was typically made up of blood relations (brothers, cousins, nephews etc.), although 'outsiders' were sometimes included as well.[166] Indeed, if the family formed the basic economic unit for the breeding of animals or the exploitation of the land, it was also a natural unit for criminal activities; for the family had in its structure all the elements necessary for criminal association: leadership, rules of conduct for its members, established procedures for division of income, experience of working together and adequate personnel.[167]

Crucially, these groups also relied on broader networks of support. Among pastoral bandits, the *katun* seems to have represented the basis for their formation. Such communal bonds were often reinforced by bribery and gift-giving, but also through ritual kinship (god-parenthood) and

[161] Kurtović 2014, 140–141.
[162] *Lam. de foris*, V, 234; *Div. canc.*, LII, 110v.
[163] Muthesius 2002, 165–166.
[164] See here Murray 1978, 64–65.
[165] Similarly strong ties bound together noble bandits and their household retainers, who frequently formed the backbone of their illegal operations.
[166] See examples concerning the Bobani Vlachs discussed above.
[167] Hanawalt 1974, 12; Koliopoulos 2005, 298.

ritual friendship (blood-brotherhood).[168] The members of this broader network carried out a number of important tasks. They provided the bandits with all sorts of information (concerning the 'target' or the movement of pursuing forces, for instance); they offered shelter, food and provisions to the members of the group;[169] or they helped them dispose of stolen goods.[170]

As is well known, many Balkan communities, especially in isolated or impregnable locales, condoned banditry and robbery as a means of securing much-needed resources and commodities. In such communities banditry was endemic; in some cases it even appears to have been the main occupation of its members, who lived parasitically off crime. However, these men were not acting alone. They usually relied upon a broad network of support, and in this light one is able to talk about entire 'bandit communities'. The members of these communities shared certain values and characteristics: living in a generally deprived setting, they were strongly focused on the acquisition of material goods; they considered cattle-lifting, robbery and murder as deeds of honour; they subsequently idealized bandits, who became the subjects of song and story, thereby entering the realm of popular myth;[171] what is more, they showed contempt for the law and, as a rule, remained beyond the reach of state authorities. The existence of 'bandit communities' provides a key for understanding the intensity and the persistence of the phenomenon of brigandage in the Balkans, particularly during the turbulent fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This was the world that gave birth to and nourished brigandage; for in pastoral societies and in areas of mountains and poor soil, where men proudly nurtured martial traditions, and where the ethos of violence was reinforced by poverty, there was nothing more natural than turning to banditry as an alternative source of income.

[168] Blok 2001, 87; *Lam. de foris*, XVIII, 106v and n. 42 above.

[169] *Zakonik*, 204–205 (Trans.: 526), article 145, and Chap. 6.

[170] *Zakonik*, 206 (Trans.: 527), article 149, which prescribes penalties for those on whom stolen goods are found.

[171] Hobsbawm 1969, 127–130.

The Victims

While poorer bandits tended to attack anyone who came their way, better organized groups usually selected their targets. To be sure, occasionally our sources specify the profession or occupation of their victims. Among these, merchants, monks, couriers, servants and serfs are the most common. Merchants, naturally, represented a very attractive target.[172] They carried cash and various goods, some of which were luxurious. In addition, they travelled along very specific trading routes, with which local bandits were well acquainted.[173] Given their social and economic standing, traders were sometimes abducted and held for ransom.[174] Large trading caravans theoretically provided security from attacks, but, as we have seen, armed bands could also be sizable. The danger posed by banditry partly accounts for the general reluctance of western traders to travel into the Balkan hinterland in great numbers.[175]

Monks, hermits and 'holy men', who shunned the fortified but crowded monastic centres in favour of the Balkan wilderness, frequently found themselves being attacked by brigands. It is safe to assume that the men who perpetrated these attacks were usually very small fish—men who took from their victims the little they had in order to satisfy their needs. Saints' *Lives*, however hagiographically coloured, provide numerous examples of this.[176] To be sure, monks were particularly vulnerable, for they were unarmed and frequently travelled alone or in small groups. What is more, the fact that many of them were affiliated with large and prosperous

[172] For some examples, see *Listine*, I, 299; II, 208; III, 263; *Acta Albaniae Veneta*, pars I, 1.1, 18, no. 40; *Lam. de foris*, II, 44; *Lam. de foris*, II, 135v; *Lam. de foris*, II, 162v; *Lam. de foris*, IV, 14v; *Lam. de foris*, V, 18; *Lam. de foris*, VII, 140; *Lam. de foris*, XVI, 29v; *Lam. de foris*, XVII, 67; *Lam. de foris*, XVIII, 37; *Lam. de foris*, XLII, 158v; *Lam. de foris*, XLIII, 123v; Krekić 1978b, 415–417; Kurtović 2014, 289–293; *Urkundenbuch*, IV, 34–35, no. 1807. Several incidents of attacks on Venetian merchants, both on land and sea, are recorded in the Claims Commision of 1278, which was set up to produce a request for damages from Michael VIII Palaiologos for losses suffered at the hands of Byzantine pirates and robbers between 1268 and 1277; see the discussion in Morgan 1976. For a number of Polish merchants from Lviv and Krakow who in 1386 were robbed in Moldavia by some Armenians, see Panaitescu 2000, 284–285.

[173] Kurtović 2011.

[174] *Div. canc.*, VI, 154v.

[175] Krekić 1978b, 413–417.

[176] For instance, Bees 1909, 147; *Life of Vlassios of Amorion*, 622–623; *Life of Romylos of Vidin*, 124–125 (Trans.: 32–33); Sophoulis 2016 with more examples. See also our comments in Chap. 2.

monastic institutions made them an ideal target for abduction and ransoming.[177]

Numerous assaults on couriers, who often carried money and other valuables, are recorded in the Dubrovnik archives.[178] Some of the difficulties and dangers entailed in this profession are also described by Michael Choniates in the early thirteenth century.[179] Equally common were attacks on servants conducting all sorts of household business.[180] Unsurprisingly, these men were considered 'dispensable'. They were thus killed or sold into slavery very frequently.[181] Similarly, serfs were a particularly easy prey for Balkan bandits. Numerous such assaults are recorded, for instance, by official sources in late medieval Banat.[182]

A Word on Dalmatian and Turkish Pirates

Although in this study there will be no systematic treatment of maritime banditry, the action of pirates operating along the Adriatic and the Aegean coasts deserves some mention. In the Adriatic, several groups engaged in piracy as a regular means of sustenance at least until the thirteenth century. The most important among them were the Narentans, who occupied the area between the Cetina and Neretna rivers. Having gradually taken control of number of important Dalmatian islands (Korčula, Vis etc.), they started operating across the sea, making Adriatic shipping extremely hazardous. Around 839 Venice launched a major campaign against their strongholds and succeeded in forcing a treaty upon them.[183] Nevertheless, the Narentans continued to obstruct naval communications for quite some time. More Venetian operations are recorded in the 860s, 870s and

[177] See n. 154 above.

[178] *Lam. de foris*, I, 47; *Lam. de foris*, IV, 76; *Lam. de foris*, VI, 116v; *Lam. de foris*, IX, 67; *Lam. de foris*, X, 11; *Lam. de foris*, XVI, 217; *Lam. de foris*, XIX, 147; *Lam. de foris*, XXI, 162v; *Lam. de intus et de foris*, Ia, 61v; Kurtović 2014, 250–252.

[179] Michael Choniates, *Ta Sozomena*, II, 75, no. 46; 98–99, no. 60; 129, no. 81; 149, no. 93; 197, no. 104; 240, no. 116; 241, no. 117; 250, no. 122; 255, no. 126; 275, no. 135; 295, no. 146; 306, no. 153; 318, no. 160; Evaggelatou-Notara 1993, 310–317.

[180] *Div. canc.*, XLII, 206; *Lam. de foris*, IV, 82v; *Lam. de foris*, VIII, 181v; *Lam. de foris*, X, 181v; *Lam. de foris*, XXII, 264; Kurtović 2014, 257–259.

[181] *Div. not.*, XXX, 154v; *Div. canc.*, LXXXVII; *Lam. de foris*, XXV, 187v.

[182] Several examples are given by Magina 2014.

[183] Maštrović 1983, 20–21; Fine 1983, 256–257.

880s, and again in the 940s, 990s and the early eleventh century, after which their seaborne raids appear to have ended.[184]

Nevertheless, it was not long before the pirates returned to prey on Adriatic shipping. In the twelfth century the Italian coast was repeatedly ravaged by pirates from Zadar, Split and Omiš (Almisa). The latter were condemned by Pope Honorius III, who in 1222 wrote about their "unchristian customs".[185] What the Pope has here in mind is the violence against commercial ships and ships carrying Crusaders to Palestine, which in some papal charters appears as a sin.[186] Pressure on the pirates was also exerted by the Hungarian crown, but these efforts seem to have had little impact.[187] Despite the fact that Venice regularly dispatched fleets to police the Adriatic, Dalmatian pirates continued their attacks.[188] In 1280 the Venetians held a major military operation against the Kačići (the leading family in the area around the Cetina River), in the course of which they finally captured Omiš (they held it until 1287).[189] This did not put a definite end to the activity of Dalmatian pirates, though it signalled a decline in their operational ability.[190]

Turkish pirates began to ravage the northern shores of the Aegean during the second half of the eleventh century.[191] Under the Komnenoi, the government at Constantinople maintained fairly firm control over that area, although Niketas Choniates claimed that in his day pirates ruled the seas as a result of John II's policy of commuting the levies of naval conscripts from the maritime provinces to a centralized tax which was easily

[184] Dvornik 1962, 135; Maštrović 1983, 22–23.

[185] *Codex diplomaticus Hungariae*, III/1, 307, 310. In this connection see also Daniels 2019.

[186] Majnarić 2009, 82–87; Barabás 2017, 44–46.

[187] Majnarić 2009, 88; Barabás 2017, 46.

[188] Robbert 1970, 147–148; Cessi 1968, I, 218; Ahrweiler 1975, 21; Dorin 2012, 263.

[189] The Kačići were notorious bandits and pirates. Among much else, they were probably responsible for the murder of Rainer, archbishop of Split, who was stoned to death and robbed by certain 'Slavs' on Mount Mosor in 1180. Reportedly, the archbishop had visited that area in an attempt to regain some church property that had been seized by these Slavs. The contested land lay in the territory controlled by the Kačić family; Thomas of Split, *History*, 124–127. For a discussion, see Ladić–Budeč 2009.

[190] Fine 1983, 206. To be sure, the Dubrovnik archives record attacks on commercial ships well into the fourteenth century. See for instance *Dubrovniški dokumenti*, 60–61, no. 8, for an attack (perpetrated by a Bulgarian pirate named Kraven) off the coast of Spinarica, which is identified with the Albanian village of Zvërnec on the south coast of the bay of Valona; Ducellier 1981, 35–36. See also the discussion in Tai 2019, 165–174.

[191] Oikonomides 1997, 6; Pavlikianov 2017, 412–413.

diverted to other expenses.[192] The situation deteriorated even further in the fourteenth century, when Turkish pirates from Aydin, Menteshe and Karasi in Asia Minor began to visit the northern Aegean.[193] During the same period, Greek, Italian and Catalan pirates were also active in these waters.[194] Around the middle of the fourteenth century the Ottomans, by annexing the Karasi emirate, gained access to the Aegean and carried out naval raids and piracy, mainly in Thrace, Macedonia and Mount Athos.[195] The Athonite archives record many of these attacks.[196] As noted above, Athonite monks, but also men and women from the surrounding regions, were frequently sold into slavery.[197] The Ottomans continued to ravage these areas—although not always with the same intensity—until the 1540s, when they finally seized control of almost all of the Aegean.[198]

[192] Niketas Choniates, *History*, 55 (Trans.: 33); Magdalino 1993, 139–140.

[193] Živojinović 1980; Lemerle 1957, 74ff; Zachariadou 1999, 92–96; Zachariadou 1989, 213–214. Karasi pirates in particular targeted the coast of Thrace. In one of his letters, Demetrios Kydones, *Correspondence*, I, 77, no. 43, comments that during his trip from Thessaloniki to a certain city in Thrace, the pirates he encountered were more numerous than the waves.

[194] Greek and Italian pirates, who often found themselves in the imperial service, were active in the Aegean and Ionian seas already during the thirteenth century. A detailed list of damages inflicted by their attacks on Venetian ships between 1268 and 1277 are recorded in the Venetian Claims Commission of 1278; Morgan 1976, esp. 427–434. See also *Actes d'Iviron*, III, 87–92, no. 58; Fine 1983, 206, 233; Zachariadou 1983, 64; Grujić 1935.

[195] Nikeph. Gregoras, *History*, III, 99; Zachariadou 1983, 64; Jacoby 2003, 106.

[196] *Actes de Vatopédi*, I, 207, no. 31; *Actes de Docheiariou*, 172–178, no. 24 and 248–250, no. 46; *Actes de Saint-Pantéléèmôn*, 106–111, no. 13; *Actes de Zographou*, 104, no. 45; Pavlikianov 2017, 413–414.

[197] See n. 154 above.

[198] Krantonelli 2015, 47–83.

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CHAPTER 6

Responses to the Problem of Banditry in the Medieval Balkans

The evidence presented thus far leaves little doubt that banditry represented a considerable problem for most Balkan states, as it made travel and commercial activity in certain areas particularly hazardous. One suspects that banditry festered partly as a result of the inability or reluctance of central authorities to devote substantial resources, whether human or financial, in order to restore peace and security. These precursory observations allow us to formulate the aim of this chapter. The guiding questions are simply: how did the authorities attempt to control the threat of banditry, and how truly successful were these efforts?

In pursuing the answer to the first question, it is necessary to point out that the efforts made by Balkan governments focused on three main aims: to prevent criminal activity, to punish culprits and to protect civilians from attacks by bandits. To this end, two different types of measures were taken: legislative and on-the-ground responses to specific outbreaks of banditry. In what follows, a detailed analysis of this process will be undertaken.

Legislation

Byzantine legal texts do not provide a comprehensive definition of banditry. The *Pandects*, dating from the reign of Justinian I, state that "enemies are those who declare war against us, or against whom we declare war

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publicly. All others are bandits and pirates".[1] According to Justinian's Act (*Neara*) 134.13.1, it is the element of force that distinguishes banditry from theft.[2] Accordingly, a *lesteia* in which the aspect of violence was emphasized was severely punished. Thus, the *Ecloga* of Leo III (726) holds that brigands were to be brought to death by the *furca*, an instrument of execution related to the gibbet.[3] A similar penalty was prescribed by the *Basilika*, a revised Greek version of the Justinianic corpus issued by the Macedonian emperors,[4] by the *Eklogadion*, an adaptation of the *Ecloga*,[5] and in the mid-fourteenth century by the *Hexabiblos*, a manual of civil law compiled in Thessaloniki by the jurist Konstantinos Armenopoulos.[6] Matthew Vlastares, who produced a compendium of civil and ecclesiastical law around 1335 (the so-called *Syntagma*), talks instead of death by crucifixion.[7] Strict penalties were also imposed on protecting or aiding bandits.[8]

The surviving sources provide one example of the implementation of these laws by Byzantine rulers. From Demetrios Chomatenos, archbishop of Ohrid between 1216 and 1236, we hear that the ruler of Epiros (1215–1230) and emperor of Thessaloniki (1224–1330) Theodoros Komnemos Doukas imposed the death penalty on the famous bandit

[1] Hostes hi sunt, qui nobis aut quibus nos publice bellum decrevimus. Ceteri latrones aut praedones sunt; *Corpus iuris civilis*, I, 50.16.118, 861 (Trans.: Watson, IV, 406). The same definition appears in later legal texts: Πολέμιοί εἰσιν οἱ κρίνοντες πρὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ ἡμεῖς πρὸς αὐτοὺς δημόσιον πόλεμον. Οἱ δὲ μη τοιοῦτοι λῃσταί εἰσι; *Basilika*, IV, 34.1.24, 1556; Troianos 2014, 201; Ziegler 1980, 93–103.

[2] Κλέπτας δὲ καλοῦμεν τοὺς λάθρα καὶ ἄνευ ὅπλων τὰ τοιαῦτα πλημμελοῦντας· τοὺς γὰρ βιαίως ἐπερχομένους ἢ μετὰ ὅπλων ἢ χωρὶς ὅπλων, ἐν οἴκῳ ἢ ἐν ὁδῷ ἢ ἐν θαλάσσῃ, τὰς ἀπὸ τῶν νόμων κελεύομεν ὑπομένειν ποινάς; *Corpus iuris civilis*, III, 134.13, 688 (Trans.: Miller and Sarris, II, 555).

[3] Ὁ λῃστεύων καὶ ἔνεδρα ποιῶν καὶ φονεύων, ἐν ᾧ κρατεῖται τόπῳ φουρκιζέσθω; *Ecloga*, 17.50, 242 (Trans.: 76). For the *furca*, see Speck 1990.

[4] Οἱ τὰς ἐφόδους ποιοῦντες διὰ τὸ πραιδεῦσαι ἐοίκασι τοῖς λῃσταῖς, καὶ ἐὰν τοῦτο μετὰ σιδήρου ποιῶσι καὶ πολλάκις καὶ ἐν ταῖς ὁδοῖς, εἰς κεφαλὴν κολάζονται; *Basilika*, VIII, 60.51.26, 3079.

[5] Ὁ λῃστὴς, ἤγουν ὁ ἐνέδρας πρὸς ἐπιβουλῆν ἀνθρώπων ποιῶν, ἐπὶ τοῦ τόπου φουρκιζέσθω; *Eklogadion*, 17.9, 71 (Trans.: 78); Troianos 1980, 23–26.

[6] Οἱ ἐπίσημοι λῃσταὶ ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐν οἷς ἐπλημμέλησαν φουρκίζονται; *Hexabiblos*, 6.6.24–25, 356.

[7] Οἱ ἐπίσημοι λῃσταὶ ἐν τοῖς τόποις, ἐν οἷς ἐπλημμέλησαν ἀνασταυροῦνται [….]; Matthew Vlastares, *Syntagma*, 334, 353.

[8] *Basilika*, VIII, 60.27.1, 2926; Troianos 2014, 202.

Petrilo.[9] In his letter, Chomatenos claims that the punishment of men like Petrilo, who had inflicted so much suffering on Theodore's subjects, should not be considered a sin; instead, it is the highest act of humanity, since it protects the righteous and brings justice to them.[10]

The problem of banditry is addressed by legislation in most other Balkan states. In Bulgaria, the *Zakon' soudnyj ljud'm* (*Court Law for the People*), which was based heavily on Leo III's *Ecloga*, but adapted for conditions in Christian Bulgaria, appears to have been the standard legal code in the country up to its conquest by the Ottomans in the late fourteenth century.[11] Although its oldest (short) version does not contain any clauses on banditry, later versions that circulated in Russia as part of larger legal collections apply the penalty of death to brigands (*razboinici*).[12]

In Serbia, Stefan Dušan issued in 1349 a three-part legal document, consisting of an abridged Slavic translation of the *Syntagma* of Matthew Vlastares, the *Law of the emperor Justinian* (a shorter version of the *Farmer's Law* from the eighth century), as well as Dušan's original code itself (the *Zakonik*).[13] The latter seems to have been a supplement to a now lost code issued by Stefan Milutin (1282–1321), as well as a supplement to the various canon laws that also had legal authority in Serbia at the time.[14] It goes without saying that the *Zakonik* was heavily influenced by Byzantine legal texts, including those promulgated in the ninth and tenth centuries by the Macedonian emperors.

Crucially, Dušan's code contains a series of articles dealing, directly or indirectly, with the phenomenon of banditry, which evidently represented

[9] Τό μέντοι γεγονὸς εἰς τὸν περιβόητον λῃστὴν τὸν Πετρίλον, ὡς ὁ τὴν καθ' ἡμᾶς πολιτείαν ἰθύνων λόγος ἐξακριβοῦται, εὖ λογίζεται φόνος· ἀλλὰ τῶν μὲν προλαβόντων φόνων καὶ κακώσεων ἔκτισις, τῶν παρ' αὐτοῦ δηλαδὴ εἰργασμένων, εἰς ἄπειρα πλήθη ἀνδρῶν, τῶν ἐφεξῆς δὲ κωλύμη, καὶ τῶν μελλόντων παθεῖν ἀπολύτρωσις· εἰ γὰρ ἔτι ζῆν εἶχεν ὁ κάκιστος, πόσοι ἔμελλον ὑπὸ ταῖς ἐκείνου χερσὶν ἀπολέσαι τὸ ζῆν; Demetrios Chomatenos, *Ponemata*, 364, no. 110. For the Slavic origin of Petrilo, see Dželebdžić 2006, 494.

[10] οὐ γὰρ εἰς ἁμαρτίαν λογισθήσεται ἡ ἐκείνου ἀπώλεια, ἐπείπερ εἰς κοινὸν ὄφελος γέγονεν; Demetrios Chomatenos, *Ponemata*, 364–365, no. 110.

[11] See *Zakon' soudnyj ljud'm*. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Kiril Nenov for providing me with a copy of this text. There is still a wide debate concerning the (Moravian or Bulgarian) origin of the text; see, for instance, Andreev 1963, 331–344; Procházka 1968, 112–150; Angelini 2015, 484–498. The short version was attributed to the ninth century on the basis of a number of archaic linguistic features. See Biliarsky 2014, 216–227.

[12] *Zakon sudnyj ljudem* (prostannoj redakcii), 40, 70, 107, 146 .

[13] Solovjev 1998, 401–415; Alexandrov 2012; Angelini 2013, 488–501.

[14] Fine 1987, 314.

a major problem in the Serbian territories.[15] One of Dušan's primary concerns was the security of foreign merchants and caravans crossing his realm. Already before the mid-fourteenth century, a number of treaties signed with the city of Dubrovnik provided for the safety of its traders.[16] Similar guarantees were often given to Venetian merchants.[17] To this end, Stefan Milutin appears to have made the villages and their authorities liable for the security of traders.[18] The *Zakonik* reproduced this custom,[19] imposing a fine of 500 *perpers* to those stealing their goods.[20] In addition, local authorities which denied hospitality to merchants were to be held responsible for any damage the latter suffered thereafter.[21]

[15] Specifically, articles 103, 118, 126, 143, 145, 146, 149, 150, 157, 158, 159, 160, 180, 183 and 191.

[16] *Dokumenti Srpskih vladara*, 129–130, no. 1; 134, no. 3; 138, no. 5; 149–150, no. 10; 153, no. 11; 173, no. 21; 184, no. 29; 269, no. 84. In some cases (nos. 16, 29, 84) promises of compensation for loss of goods were made.

[17] *Listine*, I, 377; II, 75–76.

[18] Burr 1950, 519.

[19] Article 160: "If it so happen that any traveller, merchant or monk be robbed of aught by brigand or thief, or be in any way detained, let them all come to me and I will repay them what they have lost and I will recover it from the prefects and lords to whom the patrolling of the road was entrusted. And let any traveller, merchant or Latin come to the first guard with all that he has and bears with him, that the guard deliver him to guard all the way. And if it so happen that he lose aught, there is the jury of trusty men, and whatsoever they shall swear upon their soul to those jurors, that shall the prefects and guards pay them"; *Zakonik*, 210–211 (Trans.: 530–531); Solovjev 1980, 304–305.

[20] Article 118: "No man, noble or other, may molest merchants who travel about the Tsar's dominions, nor rob them by force nor scatter their merchandise, nor take their money by force. Whosoever shall be found seizing or robbing their merchandise shall pay five hundred"; *Zakonik*, 192–193 (Trans.: 519); Solovjev 1980, 273–274.

[21] Article 159: "When merchants come for a lodging for the night, if the reeve or headman of the village do not admit them to rest in the village according to my law as it is in the code, if the traveller lose aught, that reeve or headman shall pay all, for not having admitted him to the village"; *Zakonik*, 210 (Trans.: 530); Solovjev 1980, 304.

By the same token, the code made each locality responsible for keeping order in its territory. This was set forth in articles 126,[22] 158[23] and 191,[24] but it is more explicitly stated in article 145: "In whatsoever village a thief or brigand be found, that village shall be 'scattered' and the brigand shall be hanged forthwith, and a thief shall be blinded and the headman of the village shall be brought before me and shall pay for all that the brigand or thief hath done from the beginning and also shall be punished as a thief and a brigand".[25] The following article adds that "prefects and lieutenants and bailiffs and reeves and headmen who administer villages and mountain hamlets. All punished in the manner written above, if any thief or brigand in them".[26] Article 143 held liable border lords (*kraištnici*) for the incursions of brigands from across the frontier.[27] The *kefalije* or prefects, who were entrusted with the duty of maintaining order in the main highways, were likewise held responsible for any robberies committed in the land under their command.[28]

Elsewhere, the *Zakonik* holds that a brigand will be punished if he is taken in the act. He will be found guilty "if there be found on him a stolen thing, or if he be taken in the act of robbing or thieving, or when they are handed to the county or to the village, or to the headmen or to the lord

[22] "If there be robbery or theft on urban land around a town, let the neighbourhood pay for it all"; *Zakonik*, 196 (Trans.: 522); Solovjev 1980, 280.

[23] "If there be an unpopulated hill between two counties, the neighbouring villages which are around the hill shall keep the watch. If they fail to keep watch, whatsoever happen on that hill in the wilderness by way of damage or robbery or theft or any crime, then shall those neighbouring villages pay, to whom it has been ordered to keep the watch"; *Zakonik*, 210 (Trans.: 530); Solovjev 1980, 303–304.

[24] "If a brigand steal the Tsar's swine, let the neighbourhood pay. When swine are stolen, let the swineherd be judged with the county, as the court may decide"; *Zakonik*, 221 (Trans.: 537); Solovjev 1980, 327–328.

[25] *Zakonik*, 204–205 (Trans.: 526); Solovjev 1980, 293–294.

[26] *Zakonik*, 205 (Trans.: 526); Solovjev 1980, 294–295.

[27] "If any brigand, coming through a frontier province, rob anywhere and again return with his booty, let the Warden of the Marches pay sevenfold"; *Zakonik*, 203 (Trans.: 525); Solovjev 1980, 292.

[28] Article 157: "Where there are mixed counties, ecclesiastical and Imperial villages, or seigneurial, and all the villages are mixed, and there is not one lord over the whole county, but if there are prefects and judges whom I have appointed, let them place guards on all roads, and let them hand over the roads to the prefects, to keep them with their guards, and if anyone rob or steal or do any crime, let recourse be had forthwith to the prefect, who shall pay him from his own house, and the prefects and patrols shall seek the robbers and thieves"; *Zakonik*, 209–210 (Trans.: 530); Solovjev 1980, 303.

who is over them, as written above. And these brigands and thieves shall not be pardoned but blinded and hanged".[29] Moreover, if one was accused of brigandage but there was no proof against him, then he was to undergo the ordeal by iron as a means of learning the truth of the accusation. Thus a piece of iron was heated in the doorway of a church and the accused was obliged to lift it from the fire and place it on the Holy Table. If he succeeded in doing this without hurting himself he was declared innocent and discharged, but if he burnt his hands, it was deemed that God had declared him guilty.[30]

As it has already been pointed out, shepherds constituted the most important source of banditry in the medieval Balkans. This is confirmed by Dušan's code, which decrees that all herdsmen engaging in acts of brigandage would appear before the royal court.[31] This may suggest that shepherds were customarily tried by the local authorities or powerful magnates. However, as we have seen in the case of the Bobani Vlachs, the elders of pastoral communities in the area around Dubrovnik—and possibly in Serbia too—seem to have exercised some judicial powers as well.[32]

Scholars have rightly remarked that the articles discussed above demonstrate the weakness of the state in maintaining order in rural areas, which caused it to transfer the responsibility down to the local authorities and inhabitants.[33] However, the *Zakonik* is also predicated on the (correct) assumption that members of rural communities often supported bandits by providing them with all sorts of information, shelter and supplies, or by simply helping them dispose of their loot.[34] By supporting the brigand, the locality thus shared in his guilt and deserved to share the punishment. The penalties prescribed by the code were evidently intended to weaken, if not destroy, these broader networks of support, in other words, to cut these bandits out of their social and economic framework. At the same time, they were aimed at breaking the economic circulation of stolen goods. In particular, high-value moveable goods such as horses and livestock were

[29] Article 149: *Zakonik*, 206 (Trans.: 527); Solovjev 1980, 296.

[30] Article 150: *Zakonik*, 206–207 (Trans.: 527); Solovjev 1980, 296–297.

[31] Article 183: *Zakonik*, 219 (Trans.: 535); Solovjev 1980, 322–323.

[32] *Lam. de foris*, XVII, 244; Kurtović 2012, 29–30.

[33] Fine 1987, 317. Similar measures can be found in western Europe. For some examples see Reuter 2006, 62–63.

[34] See the discussion in Chap. 5.

meant to change hands only in precisely regulated and controlled conditions.[35]

A good example of how the locality was held responsible for acts of brigandage committed in its territory is offered by a royal charter issued in 1376. The charter refers to an incident that occurred during the reign of Stefan Dušan. Bandits attacked, killed and stole the horses of some of his men in the vicinity of the villages Makrijevo and Mokrane near Strumica. As a consequence, the Serbian ruler demanded compensation (the so-called *priselica*) from the surrounding settlements, which in the end had to be paid by the Hilandar monastery on Mount Athos, the owner of the land on which the crime was perpetrated.[36] Compensation was also given, by orders of Serbian rulers, to foreign merchants for damages incurred in Serbia.[37]

Further west, in the city of Dubrovnik, concrete definitions of criminal acts are set out in book six of the Statute of 1272, which is probably based on earlier legal provisions, including a—now lost—criminal statute dated to the 1230s.[38] Interestingly, there is a significant correspondence between the criminal regulations contained in the Statute of Dubrovnik and those in Statutes of other Dalmatian cities that were under Venetian domination. It has thus been suggested that Venice provided the model of these legal texts in order to facilitate and influence the process of compiling the Statutes of Adriatic cities.[39]

As already mentioned, banditry festered in the region of Dubrovnik, and especially along the land routes connecting that city with the Balkan interior. Indeed, several attacks on merchants and caravans were reported on an annual basis in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Many of these were perpetrated by members of the local Vlach communities.[40] To address

[35] Article 180: "If anyone find aught robbed or stolen or taken by force, let each party in the case give evidence. If anyone buy anything, either in the territories of my empire or in another land, let him give evidence touching it, and if he produce no evidence, let him pay according to the law"; *Zakonik*, 218 (Trans.: 534–535); Solovjev 1980, 320–321.

[36] *Odabrani spomenici*, 170; Popović 2012, 167. For the confusion between *priselica* and *preselica* (the right of the ruler, his nobles, state officials, envoys and foreign ambassadors of demanding board and lodging when they travelled through the country, see Blagojević 1971, 165–188; Blagojević 2009.

[37] See, for instance, *Listine*, III, 263.

[38] For the history of local legislation in Dubrovnik, see *Statute of Dubrovnik*, 7–9. I would like to thank Dr Nella Lonza for allowing me access to this volume.

[39] *Statute of Dubrovnik*, 8, 11.

[40] See Chap. 5.

this problem, the Statute of 1272 prescribed harsh penalties for offenders: "Highwaymen (*robatores stratarum*) shall be condemned eightfold for the first robbery, sixteenfold for the second and may the punishment always be doubled further. Should he rob up to one *hyperper* and should he be unable to pay his penalty, may he be fustigated and branded. Should he, however, rob from one *hyperper* up to three and be unable to pay for it, may he lose one eye. Should he rob from three up to six *hyperpers*, may he lose his right hand. But should he rob from six to ten *hyperpers*, may he lose both his eyes; should he, however, rob from ten *hyperpers* more, may he be hanged".[41] Homicides and injuries inflicted with weapons were subject to equally strict punishment.[42]

While the Ragusan authorities did all in their powers to prosecute bandits and highwaymen, it appears that only a very small number of them was ever brought to trial and, eventually, found guilty of the crimes charged.[43] The fact that these crimes were usually committed outside Ragusa's borders was certainly one reason for this. The lack of cooperation from community leaders—for instance, Vlach *katunars*—who were generally reluctant to investigate charges against members of their communities presented another major difficulty. Thus, as a rule, acts of banditry remained unpunished, and this encouraged local bandits to continue their criminal pursuit.

The evidence of legislation against banditry in the Romanian lands is, unfortunately, slight. In Transylvania, the Banat and other border regions of the Hungarian kingdom, the local nobility often applied the death penalty to notorious criminals, including *latrones*.[44] For the most part, however, penalties were financial.[45] In Wallachia and Moldavia, on the other hand, the principle of collective responsibility appears to have been in force. Thus, the inhabitants of towns or villages were required to turn in those committing crimes on their territory, on pain of paying a special tax called *duşegubina*.[46] In some cases, they were also required to compensate the victim or his family. Indeed, from a document issued by the prince of Wallachia Vlad Ţepeş (1436–1442, 1444–1447) we hear that the citizens

[41] Article 6, book 5: *Statute of Dubrovnik*, 230–231. See also Lonza 2014.
[42] Articles 1 and 3, book 5: *Statute of Dubrovnik*, 228–229.
[43] See, for example, Kurtović 2012, 36, 83–84.
[44] *Diplome*, 95–96.
[45] Magina 2013, 74–75.
[46] Rădvan 2010, 199. Once the fine was paid, the members of the community could acquire compensation by selling a part of the property that belonged to the criminal.

of Braşov were required to pay damages for the amount of money and clothes lost when a prominent merchant from Târgovişte named Zanvel was robbed and murdered.[47]

On-the-Ground Responses to Banditry

Apart from legislating, Balkan governments took a number of active steps to prevent or counter the threat of banditry. Among these countermeasures in the first place was policing the countryside. Given the lack of any centrally organized police force, this task was entrusted to the authorities of each province, which had overall responsibility for the fight against crime. In Serbia, the *kefalija* (from Greek *kephale*, meaning 'head', 'prefect'), an office that appears during the reign of Stefan Milutin (1282–1321) in territories seized from Byzantium, had civil, judicial and military powers, and was ultimately responsible for ensuring public order.[48] As noted above, Dušan's code made them liable for any robberies committed in their provinces.[49] This institution was also adopted in late medieval Bulgaria, with very similar functions.[50] Thus, from the *Life of St Romylos of Vidin* we hear that the (Byzantine or Bulgarian) *kefalija* of the town of Skopelos in Thrace warned the hermits of Paroria about Muslim bandits in the vicinity.[51]

One of the main responsibilities of the *kefalija* was to organize local policing bodies in the provinces under their command. In a number of royal charters issued in Serbia in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries we hear of the *gradobljudenije*, the service of providing guards to towns and roads in order protect travellers from the attacks of bandits. These guards were under the supervision of the *kefalija*, who, as noted already, was in charge of maintaining order in provincial highways.[52] It is not entirely clear where these guards came from, but it would seem reasonable to suppose that the *kefalije/kephalai* were at the mercy of whatever support they could summon from the local communities. Thus, they usually called upon former soldiers and peasants. Two forged chrysobulls of John V

[47] *Documente privitoare*, 81, no. 56; Rădvan 2010, 207–208.
[48] Blagojević 1999, 292–295; Ćirković 2004, 70–71.
[49] *Zakonik*, 209–210 (Trans.: 530).
[50] Andreev 1967, 15–16; Biliarsky 1994, 553–562; Biliarsky 2011, 271–272, 371–373.
[51] *Life of Romylos of Vidin*, 129 (Trans.: 36).
[52] *Zakonski spomenici*, 401, 448, 498, 512, 514; Solovjev 1980, 303.

Palaiologos (1341–1391) for the monastery of Zographou (dated to 1342) decree that "no one has permission to dare extract anyone from the villages of this monastery, either as foot or mounted watch". This may suggest, as scholars have long pointed out, that local authorities were trying to conscript the monastery's peasants into guard service.[53] In addition, dependent peasants were often required to finance guard service. Thus, in the early fifteenth century, John VII Palaiologos, governor of Thessaloniki at the time, granted the monastery of St Paul a village in the region of Kassandreia along with its fifteen peasant families with the provision that these families "give annually the thirtieth part from the income of their produce for the sake of the guard of the *kastellion* and the rest of the towers, and in time of the peninsula's need, they come together and help in every possible way with the security and guard of the castle and of the peninsula, as the times and necessity dictate".[54] Another example of peasants financing guard service organized by the state is offered by a decree issued by the exiled *despot* of the Morea Demetrios Palaiologos (1449–1460) in 1462.[55]

From a charter of Stefan Dušan for the Hilandar monastery, dated to June 1355, we hear of certain 'imperial watchmen' (*b'ci*) in the area of the village Karbinci, near Štip, who reported directly to the *kefalija*.[56] It has recently been suggested that their duty was to safeguard the nearby Kozjak route.[57] Whether these were professional, full-time guards or served only on a part-time basis remains unknown.[58] Elsewhere, the service these men

[53] διατηρηθήσονται δὲ ταῦτα πάντα ἀνενόχλητα καθόλου καὶ ἀδιάσειστα καὶ ἀνεπηρέαστα ἐκ πάντων τῶν δημοσιακῶν κεφαλῶν καὶ ἀπαιτημάτων [….] τοῦ μὴ ἔχειν ἄδειαν τολμῆσαι τις ἐκβαλεῖν τινὰ ἀπὸ τῶν τοιοῦτων χωρίων τῆς τοιαύτης μονῆς, μήτε βίγλαν πεζὸν ἢ καβαλλάριν; *Actes de Zographou*, 78, no. 33; Bartusis 1992, 319.

[54] *Schatzkammer*, 128, no. 45–46 II; 127, no. 45–46 I; Bartusis 1992, 318. Similarly, in late medieval Transylvania (and elsewhere in the Hungarian realm) nobles whose estates were menaced by soldiers-turned-brigands had the right to arm their peasants in order to defend their property; *Decreta regni mediaevalis Hungariae*, decree of 25 January 1486, xxxi, 55–56.

[55] Sigalas 1930, 344–345. These *paroikoi* were transferred by Demetrios to the Athonite monastery of Vatopedion.

[56] *Zakonski spomenici*, 428. Likewise, from Kantakouzenos we hear that roads were guarded by men who were given this duty by the emperor; John Kantakouzenos, *Histories*, I, 210.

[57] Popović 2012, 166 and 164 for the Kozjak route. As Popović points out, his hypothesis seems to be corroborated by the reference, in a charter from 1377, to the village Vardišta, some five km southwest of Gorni Kozjak. The name of the village seems to be derived from the Greek *vardia* (guard, watchman).

[58] For a discussion, see Solovjev 1926, 187–188; Bubalo 2004, 148–154; Petrović 2015, 107–114.

provided is called *biglja* (from the Greek *vigla*—watch), and, as in Byzantium, it may have been financed by a special tax, similar to the Byzantine *vigliatikon*.[59]

Given the very weak structures of policing on a local level, there can be no doubt that some of those recruited came from the edge of society. Often these men lived a double life. On the one hand they were members of a force whose purpose was to stamp out brigands, and on the other, now and again as good opportunity offered, were engaged themselves in criminal activity. This is clearly illustrated in the account of Nikephoras Gregoras concerning his mission to the Serbian court in 1327. While riding up the Strymon valley in Macedonia, his party encountered a group of 'Mysians', that is, local Vlach or Slav settlers, who carried axes, lances and longbows. As they explained to the members of the Byzantine embassy, they were road guards, hired by a local landowner or a state official (perhaps a *kefalija*) to keep others from plundering. However, due to poor supervision, they took on the habit of ambushing travellers in the forest.[60] Quite the same way, the Albanian tribe of the Burmazi, who during the first half of the fourteenth century were settled in the Serbian-Ragusan border where they were entrusted with policing and garrison duties, are reported to have been frequently engaged in looting activities.[61] To be sure, the fact that central or provincial authorities were willing to transfer powers of violence to troublesome members of society in order to deal with brigands indicates both the extremity of the danger and the weakness of Balkan states to deal with it.

One would have expected that Balkan states must have taken additional measures against brigandage. Some of these may not have been specifically directed against the bandit but against his surroundings and his hideout. Given that the forest was the brigand's place of action, it is likely that woodlands alongside the main roads were cleared or cut back by local authorities to make bandits' trade more difficult.[62] For the protection of travellers, the authorities seem to have taken a number of measures. As we have seen, Dušan's code gave state officials, employees and foreign

[59] *Zakonski spomenici*, 496; *Povelje*, 412–413. For the *vigliatikon*, see Bartousis 1992, 147, 311.

[60] Nikeph. Gregoras, *Letters*, 108, no. 32a.

[61] Pijović 2018, 250–251 n. 717.

[62] For similar measures taken in thirteenth-century England, see Clanchy 1980, 42–43; see also Prestwich 1988, 280.

emissaries the right of demanding board and lodging on their journeys.[63] Merchants enjoyed similar rights, especially in the countryside.[64] On the other hand, in towns and along the main arterial routes there were inns, which offered some shelter for the night.[65] Nevertheless, the protection that such lodgings offered against the danger of a night in the open was in no way complete. To be sure, the concentration of travellers in inns and taverns attracted criminals, and, as a matter of fact, our sources provide evidence of the risk of being robbed or murdered either by the innkeeper or by other guests.[66]

Practical protection on the road was provided above all by the carrying of weapons, which does not appear to have been subjected to any form of prohibition in the medieval Balkans.[67] Lay and ecclesiastical officials, as well as members of diplomatic delegations, were usually defended by large, armed retinues, although it was precisely their retinues that made them easily identifiable.[68] Thus, the Byzantine delegation of 1269, which was to negotiate the marriage of Anna Palaiologina, daughter of Michael VIII (1261–1282), with Stefan Milutin, encountered serious obstacles while travelling in western Macedonia. According to George Pachymeres, when the Byzantine delegates heard that local bandits had recently robbed a Serbian nobleman they became extremely worried because, if these bandits were willing to waylay their own notables, then they were most

[63] Article 133: *Zakonik*, 198 (Trans.: 523); and article 156: *Zakonik*, 209 (Trans.: 529–530); Solovjev 1980, 284–285, 301–302.

[64] Article 159: *Zakonik*, 210 (Trans.: 530); Solovjev 1980, 304–305.

[65] Article 125: *Zakonik*, 195–196 (Trans.: 521); Solovjev 1980, 279. See also our comments in Chap. 3.

[66] For the account of Mathew Gavalas, bishop of Ephesos, who describes how one of his companions encountered a group of local brigands at an inn near the town of Vrysis in Thrace, see Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 193, and Chap. 5. Moreover, George Oinaiotes, in a letter describing a journey from Constantinope to Mount Ganos, some 20 km southwest of Rhaidestos, speaks of the dangers posed by some inkeepers (οὐ ξενοδόχους εὕρομεν φονικόν ὁρώντας); Ahrweiler 1996, 24; Karpozilos 1993, 533. For crimes committed in taverns and inns in the area of Dubrovnik, see Ravančić 1998. For attacks perpetrated in English inns and hostels, see Röhrkasten 1990, 369.

[67] See, for instance, Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 197. However, in August 1318, in the aftermath of Stefan Milutin's campaign in the hinterland of Dubrovnik, the council of that city forbade foreigners entering its territory from carrying arms; Pijović 2018, 261–262 n. 752. For the background of the Nemanjid involvement in the region, see Fine 1987, 209–211.

[68] The examples of the embassies of Theodore Metochites in 1299 and Nikephoros Gregoras 1327, both consisting of several men, have already been mentioned.

unlikely to spare foreign ones. And indeed, north of Ohrid the embassy fell into an ambush and was forced to return.[69] Nevertheless, on some occasions sizable groups of travellers were able to fend off attacks by bandits, as in the case of a Serbian party, who on the way to the Hilandar monastery, around 1307 or 1308, were attacked by a local potentate.[70]

An attempt to deal with the threat posed by banditry was also made by the Byzantine Church. The information comes from a letter sent by a senior ecclesiastical official to a bishop in Byzantine-held Bulgaria, possibly in the early thirteenth century. Among other things, the letter refers to the "nocturnal satanic games that the Bulgarians call *nedalai* in their barbaric tongue", which seem to have consisted of evening meetings of men who came together in the guise of games, and involved homosexuality and adultery, arson, thefts and acts of robberies.[71] The festival, whose name clearly derives from the Slavic word *nedelja* (week/Sunday) and may go back to pre-Christian times, seems to have condoned various forms of ritualized violence.[72] The letter contains a set of instructions intended to address the problem: the local bishop should see that the games are henceforth played during the day "when evil becomes weaker through shame". Ideally, the local clergy should do all it can to prevent the festival from taking place. If this proved impossible, they were instructed to try to convince the parents of young men and women to keep their children from participating in the games. If the parents disregard this warning, they would be denied priestly blessing (ἱερατικῆς εὐλογίας ἐστερημένας) and would be excluded from participating in the sacraments.[73]

In an effort to increase the degree of security in rural areas, government authorities and private landowners resorted to the erection of watchtowers

[69] The brigands are said to have stolen a number of "excellent horses" from the Byzantine party; George Pachymeres, *History*, II, 454–457.

[70] *Životi kraljeva*, 345–346.

[71] Τὰ γὰρ σατανικὰ παίγνια, ἃ νεδάλας μὲν βαρβαρικῶς καλοῦσιν οἱ Βούλγαροι, νυκτερινὰς δὲ ἔχουσιν ἀνδρῶν ἐπιμιξίας ἐπὶ τὸ παίζειν δῆθεν συναγομένων, κἀντεῦθεν τὰ τοῦ σκότους ἔργα χυδαῖα τελούμενα, φθορὰς δὲ σωμάτων καὶ μοιχείας, ἔτι κλοπὰς καὶ ἐμπρησμοὺς καὶ ληστείας καὶ ὅσα τούτοις ἑπόμενα κωλύεσθαι παρὰ τῶν ἱερέων τῆς τοιαύτης ἐνορίας; *Ekloge*, 185.

[72] Kretzenbacher 1982, 106–130; Podskalsky 2000, 33–34 n. 138. For information on the Rousalia, another festival which is likewise rooted in pagan culture, but which in Christian times was celebrated during Pentecost, see Demetrios Chomatenos, *Ponemata*, 387–389, no. 120.

[73] *Ekloge*, 185. See also the discussion in Messis 2018, 269–274; Kaldelis 2017, 30; Iliev 2010, 233 n. 381.

and other fortified structures. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, hundreds of such fortifications were probably scattered around the Balkan countryside. They were to be found in various contexts: as part of estate complexes, within settlements and monasteries, or as freestanding structures on cultivated land, natural passages and primary communication routes.[74] They functioned as places of refuge and lookout posts, although towers (*pyrgoi*) built on private estates formed also part of their administration centres.[75] Given that these structures could clearly not withstand a protracted siege, the threat against which they were meant to provide protection was local bandits, pirates and small raiding parties.

Several fortified structures in various degrees of preservation are still standing today and provide important information regarding the efforts to enhance security in the countryside. Most of them are located in south-eastern Macedonia, especially the region of Chalkidike and the lower Strymon valley, an area that was economically connected with Mount Athos.[76] Initially between two and seven stories tall, and up to twenty metres high, these towers are either square or rectangular in plan. Their walls are usually made of rubble, stone masonry or brick. The entrance is above ground level, often on the second floor, and was accessed by a spiral staircase, removable wooden stairs or a ladder.[77] The lower stories are in some cases pierced with loopholes which provided ventilation and illumination. By contrast, the ground floor does not have openings and appears to have served for the storage of water and other provisions.[78] As noted already, one of the primary functions of these structures was to provide refuge for the people living in it and in the surrounding areas. It is thus estimated that a five-floor tower whose interior measured 6×6 metres could accommodate dozens of people.[79]

While there is no doubt that many of these towers were attributed to state efforts, there is relatively little evidence to substantiate this claim. A letter of Patriarch Isaias (1323–1334) to the monastery of Iviron informs us that, after imperial intervention, the monks of that monastery agreed to

[74] For an overview of the evidence, see Bogdanović 2012; Ćurčić 1997a, 19–51.

[75] Smyrlis 2016, 193, 194.

[76] For a survey, see Zikos 1998; Papangelos 2000; Bogdanović 2012.

[77] Bogdanović 2012, 188–190; Smyrlis 2016, 192–193; Zikos 1998. In the Athonite tower of Kolitsou, built in the 1370s, the entrance is almost five metres above ground. This, however, is an exception; Theocharides 1997a, 218–219.

[78] Bogdanović 2012, 188; Theocharides 1997b, 220.

[79] Smyrlis 2016, 195.

build a tower at the village of Komitissa on the Athos peninsula. The tower was to be manned by peasants who would act as watchmen, warning neighbouring peasants of bandits or raiding parties.[80] Furthermore, from a chrysobull issued by John V Palaiologos for the monastery of St Anargyroi of Kosmidion in 1342, we hear that the monks of that monastery built a tower outside Rhaidestos in Thrace at the request of Andronikos III.[81] Likewise, two hagiographical texts dated to the fourteenth century, the *Lives* of *St Gregory of Sinai* and *St Theodosios of Tărnovo*, indicate that the ruler of Bulgaria Ivan Alexander raised a tower for the protection of the hesychast monks of Paroria in Thrace.[82] In 1313 the monastery of Alypiou received state land on Mount Athos on the condition that the monks restore a tower that had been destroyed by Turkish pirates.[83] Moreover, from the Acts of the Athonite monastery of Dionysou we hear that around 1418 *despot* Andronikos Palaiologos (1408–1423), the governor of Thessaloniki, paid for the construction of a tower for the protection and security (πρὸς φυλακὴν καὶ ἀσφάλειαν) of those who were going to settle at Mariskin, a deserted village acquired by the monastery.[84] To protect that same area (Kassandreia), John VII Palaiologos (April–September 1390) had earlier built a wall and rebuilt a number of older towers.[85] It may be worth remarking here that very similar evidence comes from the Dalmatian coast. Thus, from the *Historia Salonitanorum*, written by Thomas, archdeacon of Split, we hear that the occurrence of bandit raids stemming from Mount Mosor was so frequent that around 1240 the *podesta* of Split Gargano de Arscindis (1239–1242) commissioned a fortress to be built at Kamen, east of the city, to serve as a safe refuge for the local population.[86]

Several other fortified structures were almost certainly built on state initiative. The 'tower of King Milutin', as well as those of St Basil on Lake

[80] *Schatzkammer*, 249, no. 93; Ostrogorski 1971, 227–228, 233–234; Bartusis 1992, 316.

[81] Lappa-Zizicas 1981, 268.

[82] ἀλλ' ὁ θαυμάσιος οὗτος καὶ ὑψηλότατος βασιλεὺς τῶν Βουλγάρων [….] διὰ ταῦτα καὶ πύργον ἐκ βάθρων ἀνοικοδομεῖ στερρότατον καὶ ἰσχυρὸν εἰς ὕψος τε ἐπηρμένον καὶ πλατυνόμενον εὐρυχωρίᾳ καὶ εἰς κάλλ ος σὺν κόσμῳ πανταχόθεν ἀπεξεσμένον; *Life of Gregory of Sinai*, 344; *Life of Theodosios of Tărnovo*, 14. For the chrysobull issued by Ivan Alexander in favour of the monasteries of Paroria, see Tachiaos 1983.

[83] *Actes de Kutlumus*, 56, no. 9.

[84] *Actes de Dionysiou*, 91, no 13; Smyrlis 2016, 199, no. 14. Somewhat later, a tower was raised at the monastery of Dionysiou for defence against pirates; *Life of Dionysios of Athos*, 57.

[85] *Actes de Xèropotamou*, 206, no. 28.

[86] Thomas of Split, *History*, 236–237.

Kornonia, St George ('Hrusija'), and the so-called 'Albanian tower' ('Arabanaški pirg'), all belonging to the Hilandar monastery, were in all likelihood raised by Stefan Milutin between 1300 and 1320;[87] the tower of Kolitsou (Kaletzi) is attributed to John IV Kantakouzenos;[88] the *kastellion* and tower of Rebenikeia in Chalkidike was donated by Stefan Dušan to the Athonite monastery of Docheiariou in 1345.[89] What is more, the towers of Galatista and Vrasna in Chalikidike, as well as that of Apollonia along the lower Strymon valley, are thought to have been army constructions.[90]

Much greater is the number of estate towers build across the Byzantine Balkans by powerful laymen or monasteries.[91] Although these towers also served as the estates' administrative centres or as residential structures, their primary function was to provide protection for the administrative personnel as well as the peasants. Such fortifications became more prevalent in Macedonia after the twelfth century under the combined effect of the generalization of large landholding and increased political instability.[92] Nevertheless, it was during the fourteenth century that the construction of estate fortifications became particularly intense, no doubt in reaction to growing security concerns. This is clearly illustrated by the case of the Vatopedion monastery, which between 1329 and 1350 constructed at least six fortifications on estates located both along the coastal zone, where the threat of piracy was intense, but also further inland.[93]

What was the impact of the measures—both of a legislative and of an administrative kind—taken by Balkan authorities against banditry? This is, unfortunately, hard to assess. To be sure, a number of sources provide contemporary statements about the degree of security established by the actions of certain rulers in various parts of the region. From Kallistos, patriarch of Constantinople and author of the *Life of St Gregory of Sinai*,

[87] Theocharides 1989, 59–70; Ćurčić 1997b, 216–217; Androudis 2012, 301; Marković 2016, 64, 67, 71; Pavlikianov 2017, 417. Bakirtzis 2012 argues that the tower of St Basil belonged to a monastic complex.

[88] Theocharides 1997a, 218–219.

[89] Smyrlis 2016, 201, no. 28.

[90] Lefort 2006, 157; Dunn 1982, 607; Dunn 1990, 323; Theocharides–Papaggelos 1997, 222–223.

[91] Some examples are offered by Bogdanović 2012, 196–197.

[92] Smyrlis 2016, 195–196.

[93] Smyrlis 2016, 196 and 197–203 with a list of estate fortifications built in the region between the late tenth and early fifteenth centuries.

we hear that, as a result of the measures taken by Ivan Alexander, peace and security were restored in the area of Paroria in Thrace.[94] Likewise, Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425), visiting the countryside of Thessaloniki, tried to persuade his old teacher Ivanko to ride out and join him by claiming that the road was cleansed of brigands.[95] Nevertheless, these statements cannot be taken at face value, since they are *topoi* of praise (or self-praise, in the second case) of particular rulers.[96] Having said that, there is no reason to doubt that certain areas, during certain periods, remained secure, thanks to the intervention of central or local authorities. Thus, for much of the twelfth century a large section of the *Via Egnatia*, which at the time was in its entirety subject to one political authority, the Byzantine Empire, was well-maintained and well-policed.[97] This may also be true for the central areas of the Serbian realm in the first half of the fourteenth century. And yet, on its periphery, most notably in Macedonia, the situation seemed to be out of control: while travelling along the Strymon valley in 1299, Theodore Metochites claimed that the local Slav population ambushed, plundered and enslaved travellers at will;[98] the grave danger posed by bandits in that same area was also pointed out by Nikephoros Gregoras in 1327;[99] a few years later, bandits attacked, killed and stole the horses of Stefan Dušan's men in the vicinity of Strumica, despite the presence of imperial watchmen nearby.[100] By the same token, the construction of dozens of towers and other fortified structures in southeastern Macedonia in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reflects the inability of both the Byzantine and Serbian governments to enforce law and order in this particular region.

[94] *Life of Gregory of Sinai*, 346–347. From the Greek *Life of St Romylos of Vidin*, written by the monk Gregory, we hear that the saint, who had withdrawn for a while to Stara Zagora, returned to Paroria as soon as he heard that Ivan Alexander prosecuted (i.e. punished with death) the local brigands: τούτων οὕτως ἐχόντων μανθάνουσιν ὅτι ἡ ἔρημος τῶν Παρορίων καλῶς ἔχει, ἅτε τοῦ βασιλέως Ἀλεξάνδρου ἀπειλησαμένου σφοδρῶς τοῖς λωπυδύταις καὶ λησταῖς τοῖς ἔθος ἔχουσι πειράζειν τοὺς τοῦ θεοῦ δούλους [καὶ] ὡς, εἰ μὴ παύσαιντο, κεφαλικῶς αὐτοὺς ἐκτιμωρεῖσθαι; *Life of Romylos of Vidin*, 126 (Trans.: 34).

[95] [….] οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ τὴν ὁδὸν λῃστῶν καθαρεύειν οὐ μικρόν; Manuel II Palaiologos, *Letters*, 132, no. 45.

[96] Reuter 2006, 42–44.

[97] Oikonomides 1996, 13.

[98] Theodore Metochites, *Presbeutikos*, 98.

[99] Nikeph. Gregoras, *Letters*, 106, no. 32a.

[100] *Odabrani spomenici*, 170.

The suspicion that the measures implemented by the authorities had little deterrent effect is confirmed by the evidence provided by the Dubrovnik archives. The hundreds of lawsuits involving acts of banditry that were filed during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—and which clearly represent only a portion of the actual number of incidents—bear witness to the intensity and persistence of the problem of brigandage along the road system connecting Dubrovnik with the Balkan interior.[101] The fact that most of these crimes ultimately went unpunished might lead to two additional conclusions. First, that legislation against banditry in the form of law codes, royal charters, edicts and so forth was not enough by itself to bring banditry under control. As a matter of fact, harsh punishments may have led to very opposite results; for if, as already noted, banditry carried the death penalty, then it was hardly surprising if victims were not only robbed but murdered as well, so that they could neither call out the watch nor give testimony before a court at some later stage. Second, police forces operating in peripheral and border regions had, apparently, limited ability to seek out and apprehend bandits. This was very likely due to two reasons: the low number and poor training of the men recruited in these units; and the nature of the task they were assigned to, which was only to provide guard and patrol services.

In view of all these considerations, one would be inclined to suppose that the deterrent measures described above had relatively little effect. For ultimately, banditry continued to fester in several Balkan regions. What is more, the evidence of contemporary witnesses conveys a clear feeling of insecurity on the roads, including the main arterial highways.[102] Here, however, we find a paradoxical situation: the anxiety in the face of bandits was accompanied by an increased propensity to travel, characteristic from the tenth century onwards. To be sure, there were many aspects of medieval life in which attendant risk was not considered, although people must in fact have expected it. No matter how grave the danger posed by bandits, it was evidently not enough to deter merchants, craftsmen, monks or pilgrims from venturing on to the Balkan roads.

[101] See the discussion in Chap. 5 of this study.

[102] See, for instance, Matthew of Ephesos, *Letters*, 193. For several other examples, see Karpozilos 1993, 528–529.

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CHAPTER 7

Banditry in the Medieval West and in Popular Legend

Banditry in the Medieval West

Although Balkan and western European kingdoms offer an often extreme contrast of social, political, economic and institutional contexts, the patterns of criminal activity, including banditry, are very similar.[1] To be sure, much like the Balkans, many parts of western Europe were plagued by crime and public disorder during the period under consideration here. This is particularly true of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which witnessed a notable surge in criminal violence, both in urban centres and rural areas. As we will see below, a large share of the blame for this must be laid at the door of the nobility and of professional soldiers. This, however, is not to say that men from other social groups, most notably poor peasants, were not also heavily engaged in such activities.

The work of historians studying the problem of banditry in the medieval West is aided by the relative abundance of source materials, especially from England. Apart from royal writs, which became increasingly numerous from the mid-twelfth century, there are court records, which permit a study of the whole process of criminal trials, from initial denunciation through to sentence.[2] Fairly detailed and complete judicial records also

[1] See, for example, Kaeuper 2000; Nirenberg 2001; Brown 2011. For a thorough discussion of English outlawry, see Spraggs 2001. For the earlier period, see Michael H. Burrows, *Lower Class Violence in Late Antique West*, Phd Dissertation, Leeds: University of Leeds, 2017.

[2] Reuter 2006, 40.

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survive elsewhere in Europe, including several late medieval Italian cities.[3] For the earlier period, our information on banditry in general is mainly based on brief references to such matters in hagiographical, narrative and documentary sources. Inevitably, the fragmentary evidence that they provide gives an inaccurate picture of the character and development of the phenomenon in this period.

From this material it is possible to distinguish various types of bandits. There were, for instance, those who engaged in criminal acts occasionally, as a way to earn a vital little extra income. Often these men were peasants, who appear to have been driven to banditry out of sheer need.[4] There is every reason to believe that in areas affected by warfare, the systematic devastation of agricultural land may have persuaded people to turn to crime. Elsewhere, the press of population on the land—for instance, in fourteenth-century England—is likely to have led some peasants to augment their sustenance with income from theft and robbery.[5] Likewise, during the great famine of 1315–1317 the percentage of crime committed in several English counties increased by over 300%, a clear indication that many turned to illegal ways of gaining a living.[6] Several examples are known from the surviving legal and hagiographical sources.[7] These men often formed loose or 'informal' criminal associations, which, as a rule, were small in size, were made up of family or neighbours, and were held together only for a limited time while their objective was being attained.[8] Judicial records suggest that the members of these gangs usually operated outside their communities. They set up ambushes at all times of the year using weapons of war (bows and arrows, swords etc.). While those attacked were sometimes royal officers, bishops and merchants, most of their victims were peasants themselves.[9]

Similar groups operating at a more professional level frequently consisted of men of higher social standing, including members of the nobility. Indeed, there are many well-documented cases of noble bandits, especially from early fourteenth-century England. They fell into two categories.

[3] Dean 2007, 17–51.

[4] Cohen 1980, especially 311; Hanawalt 1979, 53–54, 128–134; Clanchy 1980, 46.

[5] Hanawalt 1974, 15–16; Postan 1966, 565–570.

[6] Hanawalt–Westman 1970, 98–106.

[7] See Baldwin 1970, I, 319. Several other examples are given by Murray 1978.

[8] Scholars think that this type of criminal association was particularly common during the Middle Ages; Hanawalt 1974, 13; Reuter 2006, 55; Cohen 1980, 327.

[9] Hanawalt 2011, 49.

First, there were those who used their power to terrorize the locality and exploit the peasantry in order to extend both wealth and sphere of influence. These men did not participate personally in criminal acts; hence, they usually avoided prosecution. Instead, it was their household retainers who formed the backbone of their illegitimate operations.[10] And second, there were those (usually coming from the lower ranks of the nobility) who were directly involved in murder, highway robberies, kidnappings and other felonies. Although they frequently acted on the instigation of others, it is generally believed that one of the main reasons for their criminality was their worsening economic situation.[11] To be sure, many of them were the younger sons of landed gentry, who inherited only a small portion of the ancestral estates. This was certainly the case with Eustace Folville, one of seven sons of John de Folville, Lord of the Manor of Ashby Folville in Leicestershire and Teigh in Rutland. Eustace, whose criminal career is well documented thanks to the frequent references to him in the court records between 1326 and 1333,[12] was the leader of a band which terrorized Leicestershire and the surrounding areas, committing a host of robberies, beatings, rapes and extortions. One of its most notable crimes was the abduction and ransoming of Sir Richard Wylughby, a king's justice, who was held until Edward III (1327–1377) paid a ransom of 1300 pounds in 1332. Not only did Eustace avoid arrest (as he had done many times in the past), but one year later he was pardoned in return for the military services he had rendered in the king's wars in Scotland.[13]

Another prominent criminal gang in fourteenth-century England were the Coterels, centred on the young sons of a minor noble. The Coterels, who are first mentioned in the sources in August 1302, ran a successful family enterprise in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. They pillaged the estates of the local gentry, and often employed extortion as a means of supporting themselves. What is more, they forged links with other criminal bands, most notably the Folvilles, but were also able to secure the support of powerful local figures, including Sir Robert Ingram, sometime mayor of Nottingham, sheriff of the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire

[10] See the discussion in Hanawalt 1975.

[11] For example, it has been suggested that urban expansion and the conquest of territory by the Italian city-states reduced noble lands and cut into their revenues; see Cherubini 1980, 119, 128–129.

[12] In fact, only the eldest of the Folville brothers seems to have avoided being accused of active involvement in crime.

[13] For the Folvilles, see in particular Stones 1957, 117–136; McCall 1979, 104–105.

bailiwick and many times a member of the Parliament. Thanks to these connections, the government was persuaded to take a lenient view of their actions.[14]

To be sure, there were many powerful lords, as well as lay and ecclesiastical officials, who were prepared to assist or to pay criminal knights, gentlemen and other known outlaws for a share of the booty or for illegal services rendered. The protection offered often took the form of issuing followers with liveries to wear on their garments, to display their allegiance to a powerful aristocratic affinity. However, the retainers regarded the liveries as licences to carry weapons and armour, and to behave in a lawless fashion. This practice became so widespread in many areas of Europe that even lesser nobles were able to accumulate a personal power base of men who were more proficient in the use of violence to do their dirty work for them.[15]

As the example of Eustace Folville demonstrates, noble bandits had a number of ways to subvert justice and protect themselves and their followers from prosecution. For instance, they bribed or intimidated jurors so that they would not bring charges against them.[16] In England, several statues attempted to deal with the problem of upper-class crime, but these efforts proved ineffective, chiefly as a result of the king's unwillingness to punish his nobles through the regular criminal process. Nevertheless, he had other ways to control their unruly behaviour. One such measure was to elevate their crimes to treason, which gave him legal clout to impose stricter penalties.[17] More often, he would recruit these nobles to peacekeeping commissions of various sorts (this included the arrest of other noble bandits) or would summon them to serve in foreign wars.[18]

Perhaps the best documented source of brigandage in the medieval West was the soldier. We have already seen that during the high Middle Ages much military activity focused on the plundering of the enemie's land to deny them resources and, hopefully, force them to submit. As a result, for men of arms acts such as murder, arson and theft formed a

[14] For the Coterels, see Bellamy 1964, 698–717.

[15] Dean 2014, 28. Attempts were made to restrict the wearing of such signs to those actually in a lord's service. In England, an ordinance issued in 1389 forbade lords from giving liveries to any men who were not either their household servants or their retainers engaged for life.

[16] Several examples are given by Hanawalt 1975, 7.

[17] Bellamy 1973, 49; Bellamy 1970.

[18] Bellamy 1973, 64; Hanawalt 1975, 10–11; Komornicka 2012, 199.

regular feature of their lives. Despite the fact that rulers and commanders tried, on some occasions at least, to impose minimum standards of behaviour onto their troops while on campaign, soldiers were generally regarded with fear and contempt by the civilian population.[19] This is hardly surprising, given the frequency with which professional soldiers or mercenaries, acting either under orders or on their own account, behaved, in effect, like brigands.

Just as in the Balkans, much of the pillaging and robbery carried out by soldiers was caused by desperation. The often appalling conditions of service are described by numerous surviving accounts, mainly from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They all tell the same story: many of these men had received no pay or wages and had been forced to maintain themselves off the country, plundering, stealing and holding to ransom those they could capture.[20]

Things could get much worse when the war for which these men had been recruited was no longer being waged. The rulers they had formerly served expected them simply to disperse, and this may indeed have been the case for some nobles, who might look forward to returning to their estates. However, many professional or semi-professional soldiers, who had no homes to return to, either formed themselves into companies and sought employment elsewhere, or became leaders of robber bands and preyed indiscriminately on anybody they considered worth preying on.[21] Several such groups were active in France during the Hundred Years War. They sustained themselves by taking control of towns and castles and using them as bases to plunder the countryside.[22] Other veterans of the Hundred Years War, including Sir John Hawkwood and Sir John Clifford,[23] ended up fighting in the service of various Italian towns, but their conduct was at times so unpredictable that their employers often preferred to bribe them to stay out of their territories.[24] This was certainly the case with Werner von Urslingen, the Swabian leader of the so-called Great Company, who between 1345 and 1348 roamed about Italy pillaging, holding

[19] Jamieson 2009, 99–100.
[20] For some of these accounts, see McCall 1979, 122 and Jamieson 2009, 106–107.
[21] McCall 1979, 122–123.
[22] See Jamieson 2009, 101–102.
[23] See Caffero 2006; Fowler 1998, 131–148.
[24] Caffero 1998, 37–38.

people to ransom, murdering and looting monasteries, until he was finally hired by King Louis the Great of Hungary (1342–1382).[25]

Clearly, the soldiers recruited into these companies, but also those who went on to form criminal bands, regarded civilians in a predatory manner. The fact that many of these men were known criminals, whose careers were far from sporadic, must have played its role. We have already noted the readiness of English kings to pardon outlawed or convicted criminals, often members of the nobility, in return for military or other armed service.[26] This was common in other parts of Europe too. For instance, Henry the Fowler, king of East Francia (919–936), is said to have formed a legion of ex-robbers to help in the war against the Magyars.[27] The overall effect of this practice was to introduce into the army an element whose natural tendency towards violent disorder can only have been exaggerated by their involvement in organized fighting.[28]

Several attempts were made to stop the depredations of these bands of soldiers-turned-brigands. A number of rulers, including Frederick I Barbarossa (1155–1190), Richard II (1377–1399) and Henry V (1413–1422), established strict regulations for the conduct and discipline of their troops, as a means of protecting civilian populations and the Church. Among other things, these ordinances punished violence, robbery and disorder. Nevertheless, they appear to have had little effect, as there were constant problems related to the behaviour of troops on campaign, with the peasant population—especially women—and the clergy remaining particularly vulnerable to attack.[29]

Attempts to deal with the threat posed by these soldiers were also made by the Church. In the middle of the fourteenth century a series of Papal Bulls imposed penalties on unruly companies, whose members were to be denied church burial. Likewise, clerics and laymen were forbidden to employ them, and those who supplied food or shelter to them were excommunicated.[30] The promise of financial rewards could prove far more effective. Thus, on a number of occasions the Papacy would pay off the

[25] McCall 1979, 125–126.

[26] Thus, during the reign of Edward III, and particularly in 1339–1340, at least 850 charters of pardon were granted to men who had served in the wars. Another 260 charters were granted in 1360–1361; Hewitt 1966, 30.

[27] Widukind of Corvey, *Deeds of the Saxons*, 69.

[28] Jamieson 2009, 103.

[29] Otto of Freising, Gesta Friderici, 199–202 (Trans.: 202–204); Jamieson 2009, 103–105.

[30] Fowler 2001, 118–120; Jamieson 2009, 108. See also Riisøy 2015, 49–81.

companies on the condition that they moved on to another area. However, there were times when more direct action was required. Around 1182, local people (artisans, labourers, clergymen and nobles) in Provence, Gascony and Auvergne in France formed an association, the Capuchonnés, whose main purpose was to destroy the bands of mercenaries, outlaws and brigands who infested these areas. Indeed, in July 1183 they annihilated at Dun-le-Roi a band of mercenaries who had earlier sacked three monasteries near Limoges. A few weeks later, they defeated another such group in the same area. However, over time, a growing number of brigands joined the ranks of the Capuchonnés, who diverted their attention away from attempts to re-establish peace in central and southern France, and instead began to attack rich nobles and clergymen.[31]

In certain parts of Europe, the pressing need to suppress crime in general and banditry in particular led to the creation of new institutions with special judicial or policing functions. In 1305, King Edward I of England (1272–1307) created the Trailbaston, a special type of itinerant judicial commission aimed at controlling the lawlessness that had developed in the king's absence. It involved judges being sent to all parts of the kingdom in order to prosecute criminals and their accomplices.[32] In late medieval Westphalia (a part of the Holy Roman Empire), the local authorities allowed significant powers to the *Vehmgericht*, a tribunal based on a fraternal organization of lay judges known as 'free judges'. One of their main tasks was to seek out and punish robbers, bandits and unruly nobles. If these men were caught in the act, and there were three or more judges present, the trial and punishment—usually death by hanging—would take place on the spot.[33] Similarly, several Italian cities, including Florence, Bologna, Siena and Rome, appointed a *bargello*, an official with authority to chase, capture and kill bandits within a city's territory. The *bargelli* are described by contemporary sources as "hard and cruel men" who would instil fear to the population. As a means of ensuring that bandits would not be received or sheltered, the *bargelli* often fined village communities. As a consequence, they were never particularly popular, although, as a rule, they proved to be sufficiently effective.[34]

[31] McCall 1979, 96–97.
[32] Harding 1973, 90.
[33] For the history of the *Vehmgericht*, see Fricke 2002.
[34] Dean 2007, 11, 53–54.

Several other measures intended to provide protection against bandits and highway robbers are known from our sources. In territories that had once been part of the Carolingian Empire, the institution of the *conductus*—the escorting of ordinary travellers or a merchant caravan by armed men—is documented from the twelfth century.[35] At about the same time in England, attempts were made to post watchmen at particularly dangerous sections of public roads.[36] Similar steps were taken by various Italian cities.[37] Moreover, to make travel safer, highways were sometimes broadened by cutting down the trees that stood on either side.[38]

Nevertheless, more often than not, those attacked on the road could do very little to defend themselves. Travellers normally carried weapons, and according to the laws of many medieval states, they—or anybody else—could kill a brigand with impunity.[39] To be sure, banditry carried the death penalty, although in some cases, when robbery was not accompanied by murder, the punishment depended on the value of the stolen goods.[40] Public executions of bandits were often intended to act as an exemplary punishment, and indeed, this is likely to have increased the feeling of security within the realm.[41] In reality, there is no way of telling how effective measures such as this were. Undoubtedly, the assertion in various medieval sources that a ruler brought law and order to his land cannot confirm for us the level of security or insecurity at any given time.[42] What is certain is that some periods give us the impression that there were times of greater disorder than others. This is certainly true of the fourteenth century, to mention but one example. In general, it seems that when a monarchy was weakened, lawlessness tended to become rife. By the same token, and much like what we witness in the Balkans, internecine strife, social unrest and intensive warfare provided the background against which the problem of brigandage flourished.

The intensity of the problem of banditry in several parts of Europe certainly explains the fascination of medieval men with tales of outlaws.

[35] Fiesel 1926, 385–412; Schwaab 1981, 398–417; Reuter 2006, 65.
[36] Clanchy 1980, 38, 41.
[37] Szabó 1977, 88–137.
[38] Clanchy 1980, 42–43; Reuter 2006, 60–61.
[39] Jusserand 1920, 257–258; Dean 2007, 104–105; Dean 2014, 133; Ekholst 2014, 52.
[40] Jusserand 1920, 257; Hanawalt 1974, 2; Hanawalt 1975, 3; Cohen 1980, 310 and n. 13; Ekholst 2014, 53.
[41] See for instance the *New Chronicle of St Peter of Erfurt*, 293, 295.
[42] Reuter 2006, 42–45.

These tales take the form of romances or ballads, the latter being popular songs which may be either lyric or narrative in quality. They were recited or sung at festivals and dances, predominantly by country people, and were elaborated and added to by subsequent generations.[43] Perhaps unsurprisingly, the outlaw-hero tradition is most evident in England, where the first of such identifiable figures flit through the mists of the Norman conquest. Indeed, the earliest known narrative of this kind is the story of Earl Godwin (990–1053), who much like Herewald and Fouke Fitz Waryn—the protagonists of other popular stories of chivalrous brigandage—was a historical figure.[44] Their stories, in the form in which they survive, centre around dramatic events in the political history of the Middle Ages; they therefore recount adventures on a larger scale than those of the average outlaw of the time. Still, there are striking similarities between the tales told of them and those told of other outlaws which were not drawn from history itself. For instance, the story of Robin Hood is clearly associated with that of Eustace the Monk. The latter is thought to have been born around 1170. He was the son of a French noble, who became deeply involved in the complex politics and warfare between France, England and Spain, being one of the greatest sea captains (and pirates) of his age. These general biographical details are the basis of a verse romance which was probably composed in the thirteenth century.[45] After completing his apprenticeship as a sorcerer in Toledo, Eustace becomes a monk, but upon learning of his father's death he takes to the forest and forms a band of armed men, who display adherence to the moral code of the outlaw. To be sure, there is nothing particularly heroic about his deeds. In a series of adventures designed to revenge himself on his long-standing rival, Eustache uses various disguises in order to harass, embarrass and rob the Count Hainfrois de Meresinguehans, who is nevertheless spared when he falls into Eustace's hands.[46]

As noted above, there are striking similarities between the legends of Eustace and Robin Hood. Beyond the obvious shared features—both are

[43] Keen 1961, 95–96.

[44] Seal 2011, 35–40. Earl Godwin, Herewald and Fouke Fitz Waryn were all men of high birth, and their stories were clearly written with an eye to an aristocratic audience.

[45] However, it has been shown that the poet has added a rich layer of fantastic exploits and adventures, derived from the popular romances. Among these works, the influence of the *Romance of Reynard the Fox* or *Roman de Renart* is particularly strong; Knight–Ohlgren 1997, 668–670.

[46] Keen 1961, 53–63; Seal 2011, 40; Burgess 1997, 3–48.

outlaws living in the forest, venturing out to punish and humiliate their noble rival—there are also a number of episodes too similar to be accounted for by coincidence or common tradition.[47] Robin Hood, the archetype of the noble robber (and of the social bandit, according to Hobsbawm),[48] is first mentioned in print in the 1370s, but since then his image has undergone many transformations. The first ballads to survive, from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (*Robin Hood and the Monk*, *Robin Hood and the Potter* and the *Gest of Robin Hood*, the last being the largest and, arguably, most important early ballad), present an—often—violent forest hero who outwits the forces of the town and the abbey, gaining money and property from the sheriff. They are, in other words, stories in which wicked men meet a merited downfall, while the innocent and the weak are relieved and rewarded. Thus, as Maurice Keen has pointed out, as the wicked are always the rich and powerful and the innocent the victims of poverty and misfortune, they may be said to be in essence tales of social justice.[49] Nevertheless, the ballads should not be seen as a set of general complaints from the poor. As a matter of fact, they have nothing to say of the economic exploitation of the peasantry or of the tyranny of the lords of the manors. There is no animus against the law and the existing social system itself; instead, the ballad maker (and hence his hero) is indignant against unjust social superiors. By taking the law into his own hands, Robin Hood was simply falling back upon the ancient right of those who could not obtain justice to use force.[50] In this light, modern commentators now believe that the audience of these outlaw poems was not single and that the myth was diffused across a wide variety of social groupings who were aware of the dangers of increasingly centralized authority.[51]

These tales were not the only medieval texts to deal with outlaws. Equally popular, at least until the seventeenth century, were the adventures of Gamelyn, William of Cloudesley, Clim of Clough and Adam Bell.[52] Similarly, *The Outlaw's Song*, written no earlier than 1305, railed against the institution of Trailbaston, which was open to abuse by corrupt judges. Being victimized by two of these judges, the unknown author becomes an outlaw, hides in the forest and lives by preying, along with a

[47] Knight–Ohlgren 1997, 670.
[48] Hobsbawm 1981, 41.
[49] Keen 1961, 145.
[50] Keen 1961, 160–173; Hilton 1958, 30–44.
[51] Coss 1985, 35–79; Dobson-Taylor 1995, 40; Knight–Ohlgren 1997, 6.
[52] Knight–Ohlgren 1997, 184–226, 235–268.

band of armed robbers, on merchants and clerics.[53] To be sure, the violent spirit of all these stories represents an attachment to the principle of retributive justice. Resorting to violence was the only course left open for the common man of the Middle Ages, who could think of no other means to relieve himself of the burden of corruption and oppression.

Banditry in Medieval Balkan Folklore

It would only be reasonable to suppose that, just as in the West, the intense problem of banditry in the medieval Balkans gave rise to a rich tradition that celebrated, in the form of heroic songs, ballads or tales in prose, the adventures of real or fictitious outlaws. The popularity of the Robin Hood myth from the fourteenth century onwards demonstrates that such tales operated not simply among those familiar with a particular bandit, but very much more widely. Various social groups, including peasants, appreciated these legends because they depicted an abusive, almost tyrannical social order. On the one side in these stories are all those who use their power and rank to oppress the poor. Against them stands the bandit and his companions, usually men of humble birth, independent and defiant. The bandit ultimately rights wrongs, thus becoming a symbol of heroism and the everlasting quest for justice and freedom.

Although the heroes of many outlaw legends never really existed, the background of these accounts is historical. The inspiration behind them is the everyday oppression to which the vast majority of common people were subjected during the Middle Ages. This was certainly the case in western Europe as much as it was in the Balkans. In both areas there was very little the average serf or peasant could do to overcome the conditions which bound him to poverty. His only weapon was violence, but every time his discontent flamed up into a widespread uprising, this was relentlessly put down. Only the small-time rebel, who was protected by his own obscurity, and who supported his protest against the system by preying on it, could look for some sort of success. As Maurice Keen has argued, it was precisely this kind of man whose deeds the common man chose to celebrate.[54] Indeed, the ballad makers often used stories which had been told of real persons in the past and adapted them into a story of a person who probably never existed, but who operated within an historical context that

[53] Seal 2011, 40–41.
[54] Keen 1961, 212–213.

was recognizable to contemporary audiences. Alternatively, they chose to weave imaginary stories around well-remembered historical figures. Several examples of both these types of accounts are known in Balkan folklore tradition.[55]

A range of theories have been proposed to account for the appearance of oral poetry in the Balkans. Michael Jeffreys has shown that there is a direct connection between the predominant metre of Greek folk poetry, the fifteen-syllable 'political verse', and the Latin *versus quadratus*, used mainly for satirical purposes during the Roman and Byzantine periods, only to be established as a medium for popular didactic literature from the twelfth century onwards.[56] Similarly, Serbian scholars claim that the epic poems with a long line of fifteen or sixteen syllables, the so-called *bugaršti*ca, were already being transmitted orally before the Middle Ages, although the earliest record of such songs comes from the late fifteenth century.[57] Some 150 years earlier, Nikephoros Gregoras, travelling to the court of the Serbian ruler Stefan Dečanski (1322–1331), reported that while he and his companions were trying to find their way out of the forest in which they had lost themselves, their Serb guides sang tragic songs celebrating the exploits of their national heroes.[58] To be sure, Serbian heroic ballads, often composed in an unrhymed decasyllabic line with a caesura after the fourth syllable, were passed down from generation to generation, until they began to be recorded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[59] In terms of their subject, they can be divided into two main groups or cycles; the non-historical, which include a small number of fairy tales and poems of pre-Christian and Christian origin; and the historical, drawing on themes from Serbian national history. The latter group in turn contains several ballad cycles: the Nemanja cycle (dealing with the Nemanid rulers of medieval Serbia), the pre-Kosovo, Kosovo and

[55] See the discussion below.

[56] Jeffreys 1974, 161.

[57] Pantić 1977, 421–439; Deretić 2007, 29; Milošević–Đorđević 1999, 149. This is a poem describing the imprisonment of Janko Sibinjanin (János Hunyady) by *despot* Đurađ Branković (1427–1456). It was composed by Rogiero de Pacienca, who had apparently heard that same song from members of a Serbian colony near Naples.

[58] Nikeph. Gregoras, *Letters*, 107–108, no. 32a.

[59] Of paramount importance here was the collection of popular poems published in three volumes by Vuk Karadžić (1787–1864). For the history of the study of Serbian folk and heroic songs, see Petrovitch 1915, xvii–xxii; Low 1922, ix–xxi; Milošević–Đorđević 1999, 147–149.

post-Kosovo cycle (centring on events before, during and after the battle of Kosovo in June 1389), the cycle of Marko Kraljević (celebrating the deeds of Prince Marko, the son of King Vukašin, who died fighting against the Christians in the battle of Rovine in 1394), and the cycle of *hajduks* and *uskoks* (dealing with the exploits of brigands and renegades during the period of Ottoman rule).[60] It is important to emphasize, however, that the line between historical and non-historical ballads is not always strictly drawn, since the former often contain well-known folkloric motifs.[61]

Among the various cycles of Serbian heroic ballads, by far the most important for this discussion is the one dedicated to *hajduks* and *uskoks*. The *hajduks* organized themselves into relatively small bands of armed men, who took to the mountains and lived by robbing Ottoman officials, merchants and travellers. They appear as early as the first half of the fifteenth century in Bosnia, Herzegovina and Bulgaria, where several *hajduk* hideouts are recorded in Ottoman land registers.[62] Although—much like the medieval bandit—their motive to become an outlaw was mainly economic, over time the *hajduks* came to symbolize the spirit of resistance to the oppressive Ottoman (and Muslim) rule. Thus, in Balkan folklore tradition the *hajduk* is a romanticized hero, a popular avenger and a fighter for justice and freedom.[63]

Some scholars believe that the earliest *hajduk* or *klephtic* heroes who survive as such in south Slavic and Greek songs date from the 1500s.[64] Others, however, maintain that the history of brigand songs in Greece is closely bound up with the history of the *armatolikia* (locally recruited armed bands, used by the Ottoman authorities to contain banditry in parts of Greece) that were established by the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries.[65] These songs were composed and sung, not only by the outlaws themselves but also (and perhaps mainly) by their admirers in

[60] Noyes 1913, 1–7; Petrovitch 1915, xxxvii–xxxviii; Milošević–Đorđević 1999, 150–156; Deretić 2007, 29–30; Matthias–Vučković 1987; Popović 1988. For the relation between the Byzantine and south Slavic epic tradition, see Lord 1991, 186–194.

[61] Noyes 1913, 1–2.

[62] Cvetkova 1982, 304; Pavlović–Marković 2007, 21–30. In general, for *hajduks* in Bulgaria, see Cvetkova 1971. For Serbia, see Stojanović 1984. According to Zakythinos 1976, 271, similar 'freedom fighters' made their appearance in northern Greece immediately upon the Ottoman conquest.

[63] Hobsbawm 1981, 71–72; Stojanović 1973, 555–575; Stojanović 1975, 281–295; Stoykova 1980, 273–282.

[64] Aravantinos 1996, 32–33; Politis 1973, 29–31.

[65] Politis 1973, xxxvi–xxxvii.

the village communities.[66] Their purpose was not to be true to historical fact. They did not record or commemorate actual events; instead, they were intended to celebrate the ideals of *hajduk/klephtic* life (absolute freedom, bravery etc.). To be sure, these songs did not reflect the lives and attitudes of the bandits precisely as they were, but as the bandits would have liked them to be, as they appeared to their own and to their supporters' imaginations.[67]

It is hard to believe that similar bandit heroes should not already have been the subjects of song and story during the Middle Ages. And yet, with very few exceptions, no record of such accounts survives today. Two possible explanations may be suggested for this. First, that the memory of a purely oral culture—for indeed, south Slavic, Greek, Albanian and Vlach songs of this kind are strictly the products of oral tradition—is relatively short.[68] With time, the memory of the medieval bandit—a humble peasant or shepherd—simply faded away. As a matter of fact, some historians suggest that oral memories of historical events or persons do not survive the passing of one or two generations (although other types or oral traditions usually last longer).[69] Accurate memories of historical events in oral traditions are said to be even more ephemeral.[70] However, it is often asserted that the preservation of oral traditions depends on a variety of factors which can be reduced essentially to the question of whether there was any reason to remember them.[71] As noted already, in the world of the poor, the bandit was hailed as a symbol of freedom and resistance in the face of oppressive and corrupt state officials. He came to represent the aspirations of the lower classes for a better life. His image thus acquired mythical proportions, and swiftly grew into a powerful tradition. In this context, one may suggest a second explanation for the virtual absence of the medieval bandit in the collective memory of Balkan people: the men who became famous outlaws in real life were gradually replaced in song and ballad by a

[66] As, for example, in the case of bandit-songs in nineteenth-century Romania; Vătavu 2016, 159–160.

[67] Beaton 1980, 110–111.

[68] For the Albanian epic tradition and its relation to that of the southern Slavs, see Kolsti 1990; see also Elsie–Mathie-Heck 2004. An excellent study of Vlach oral traditions, including songs and fairy tales, is offered by Katsanevaki 2014; see also Papazisi–Papatheodorou 1985.

[69] Le Roy Ladurie 1979, 428–431; Morin 2016, 199.

[70] For a more general discussion, see Vansina 1985.

[71] Thomas 1989, 123–124

diachronic hero of legendary proportions.[72] This hero sometimes retained the name of the historical bandit of the Middle Ages, but operated within a more or less contemporary—that is, post-medieval—context.

A famous bandit figuring prominently in both Bulgarian and Serbian folk tales is Momčilo, who, as we have seen in Chap. 5, was best known for his involvement in the early stages of the Byzantine civil war of the mid-fourteenth century.[73] In these tales Momčilo is presented as a brigand who fights against the Byzantines and the Turks, although his career is not localized only in Thrace and the Rhodopes, but also in other parts of the Balkans. Most of the accounts that have come down to us concern his death. Some have him perish in a battle against the Turks—a tradition which echoes historical reality. Others attribute his death to Vukašin, the king of Serbia (and co-ruler of Stefan Uroš V) from 1365 to 1371. According to one version of this story, Momčilo was betrayed by his unfaithful wife Vidosava, who wanted to marry Vukašin. The Serbian king, however, condemned Vidosava to death for her wickedness, and went on to wed Jevrosima, Momčilo's sister. They had three children, the last of which was Marko Kraljević, by far the most popular hero of Serbian epic poetry. Needless to say, there is no evidence to support the legend that Prince Marko was Momčilo's nephew.[74]

Another bandit who became immortalized in Slavic epic tradition is Rajko, Momčilo's nephew and comrade in arms. After Momčilo's death at Peritheorion in June 1345, Rajko escaped to Serbia, where he appears to have been appointed *kefalija* in the iron-producing region of Trilision and Bronte, north of Serres.[75] In Serbian tales he is presented as an Ottoman vassal, although he may well be confused with the governor of Syrmia (Srem) Radoslav Čelnik, who was also known as *vojvoda* Rajko.[76] Similarly, it has been suggested that a medieval soldier bandit may have been the prototype for the character of Novak Debelić, a fictional fifteenth century hero in some Serbian ballads.[77] It would be, finally, worth noting that in

[72] See here the useful comments of Hobsbawm 1981, 129–130.

[73] See our comments above.

[74] For a detailed discussion of Momčilo's place in Slavic folktales, see Gjuzelev 1967, 91–109; Nicoloff 1975, 68–69; Bartusis 1980, 217–218; Petrovitch 1915, 186–193; Low 1922, 1–9.

[75] *Archives de Saint-Jean-Prodrome*, 120–122, no. 37; Gjuzelev 2006, 259–264; Bartusis 1980, 210 n. 69

[76] Noyes 1913, 187–190.

[77] Stojanović 1984, 146–152.

songs of the Marko Kraljević cycle, one of Prince Marko's most prominent rivals is Musa Kesedžija, an Albanian Muslim outlaw and highwayman, who is sometimes presented as a rebel against the Ottomans.[78]

[78] Popović 1988, 156.

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

While several historians have recognized the problems which various outlaw groups caused in the Balkans during the Middle Ages, few have given much attention to the brigands themselves, their origins, their reasons for taking up banditry and the steps taken by central authorities to control brigandage.[1] In the foregoing discussion I hope I have been able to elucidate some of the fundamental problems associated with banditry in its Balkan context, and thus to provide a point of reference for the social history of the region.

To be sure, the study of Balkan banditry has, rather unsurprisingly, proven to be a particularly daunting task. Undoubtedly, the main difficulty encountered by scholars who have devoted attention to this particular subject concerns the nature of the written evidence available to them. Much of the relevant information comes from brief references in narrative, documentary and hagiographical sources, whose authors usually write for quite another purpose. As a consequence, the information that they provide is too general or vague to enable the formation of firm conclusions about the problem of banditry at any given time. What is more, some of these texts bring with them a number of difficulties. Saints' *Lives* provide a good example of this: monks, hermits and 'holy men' were among the best-travelled men of their time, who frequently found themselves being

[1] As rightly pointed out by Anscombe 2006, 87, in his discussion of Balkan brigandage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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attacked by brigands. Although episodes of this kind as reported in the *Lives* can shed important light on the conditions attendant in the Balkan countryside during the period in question, they are often regarded as hagiographical clichés and must, therefore, be treated with wary caution. Indeed, there can be no doubt that some of these stories are pieces of pure fiction. However, it is clear that hagiography could also be used to tell the truth. Many Saints' *Lives*, however hagiographically coloured, have been shown to be historically reliable, as one would expect from a source written soon after the events it describes for a contemporary or near-contemporary audience, which could hardly be deceived beyond a certain point.

Two other types of sources are of the greatest value to the study and understanding of Balkan banditry. First among these are a set of letters describing travel experiences in the region. They are usually written by Byzantine state or ecclesiastical officials, who travelled in the Balkans on official business. For these men, the occasional encounter with highway robbers—or simply the possibility of it—was particularly traumatic. Naturally enough, their accounts, apart from casting much light on Byzantine attitudes towards brigandage, contain important information about the bandits themselves.

Similarly, some of the material preserved in the State archives of Dubrovnik represents an extremely valuable source. Among this body of evidence, the reports on lawsuits and court cases that date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries stand out as being of particular importance. They concern numerous cases of banditry that, for the most part, took place along the roads connecting Dubrovnik with the Balkan hinterland. In most cases, these reports contain the names of the transgressors, as well as a list of the goods seized by them, thereby providing useful insights into the organization and activity of bandit groups in that region.

Despite the frequency with which the term 'bandit' comes up in the surviving sources, it is difficult to establish a precise meaning for the expression, since it was often applied metaphorically to a wide variety of people apart from the common robber. Practically this meant that any form of social behaviour could be classified as banditry by the authorities or by medieval authors if it was perceived as running contrary to the commonly accepted order. To make matters more complicated, legal texts do not provide a precise definition of banditry. What distinguished the latter from other forms of criminal behaviour such as petty theft was merely the element of violence. Taking all this into account, and in order to capture the essence of the kind of criminal activity with which this study is

concerned, banditry is here defined as a premeditated act of violence committed by groups or individuals with the intention of removing another's property or taking someone away by force. These crimes were always committed in rural areas. As a rule, acts of brigandage perpetrated in the course of military operations are not discussed. However, it is important to emphasize that the dividing line between soldier and bandit is often so thin as to become indistinguishable. To be sure, there are numerous examples of underpaid or underfed soldiers (particularly during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) who were driven to banditry out of sheer necessity. Similarly, soldiers preying upon civilians outside their strict military capacity feature prominently in the surviving sources. These were men for whom service in the military represented an opportunity for personal advancement. Incidents such as these are, therefore, taken into account in an assessment of the overall historical picture of Balkan banditry.

In an attempt to understand what constituted a bandit in the medieval Balkans, it is essential to make note of Eric Hobsbawm's theory of social banditry. In his classic study, which pioneered the way for much recent work into bandits in history, Hobsbawm defines the social bandit as a man who represents the opposition of local society to a distant central power seen as corrupt and oppressive, and who often equips himself with an ideology centring on the restoration of a past age of order.[2] These men are thus motivated by a desire to avenge injustice and to regulate the interaction between the wealthy and the destitute in order to prevent the exploitation of the weak. Their violence is, in other words, seen as a form of protest against the instigators of social need. Although Hobsbawm claimed that his model of the social bandit was valid for all pre-industrial peasant societies, it is certainly instructive that almost all of the examples that he uses come from the early modern period. Having said that, it is important to point out that some of the preconditions for such a character to appear may well have been in place in the medieval Balkans. Indeed, for impoverished peasants the only way of escaping their personal distress may have been by joining bandit groups. One could note at this point that only a relatively small part of the Balkan hinterland was generally suited to intensive and extensive agriculture in the Middle Ages. At the same time, the population density in those areas was clearly in the ascendancy from, approximately, the tenth century onwards, and this seems to have forced many to either find other means of making a living or migrate. Natural

[2] Hobsbawm 1981; Reuter 2006, 55.

disasters, as well as various forms of social and political disruption, precipitated by war or peasant uprisings, added to the precariousness of life, and may have pushed more men into banditry. In other words, some of Hobsbawm's criteria for the emergence of social banditry were unquestionably present in sufficient intensity in the medieval Balkans, but this is still a long way from interpreting the activity of local bandits as a protest movement.

While there can be no doubt that poverty played a decisive role in driving a section of the peasant population into brigandage, there is also strong evidence to suggest that the growing economic prosperity of large parts of the Balkans may have, in fact, contributed to the overall rise of banditry after the ninth century. That is to say, some men were forced into banditry because of economic misery, while others were attracted by the opportunities for profit in an increasingly prosperous world. Indeed, attentive examination of the archaeological evidence from rural sites in Byzantine Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria points to a considerable economic growth that seems to have continued well into the thirteenth and, in some cases, the fourteenth century. This is best attested by a notable increase in the number of settlements and a stable demographic rise. Associated with such relative prosperity was a remarkable monetary growth, archaeologically visible in several parts of the Balkans. As a matter of fact, the available evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of interpreting the growth of the regional economies as being largely based on trade. The maintenance of peace and stability during much of the period in question certainly played a role. This, in turn, resulted in the gradual growth of Balkan cities, which were slowly transformed into centres of production and trade. Although regional commerce was very much in the hands of Italians, an emerging Balkan merchant class actively interacted with foreign traders and ran the network of everyday local economic activity. Significantly, many of these men seem to have come from rural areas, suggesting a trend towards a bigger market involvement of the countryside.

Within this context, overland and river routes became important conduits of exchange between the Adriatic and Black Sea coasts and the interior. The consolidation of Byzantine rule in most of the Balkans, which created conditions of relative security in the region, together with Venice's increasing search for commodities from coastal and inland communities, led in fact to a more intensive use of land communications from the eleventh century onwards. The main roads were frequented by merchants, among whom the Ragusans were by far the most important. They were

active in the trading routes connecting the Adriatic coast with the Dalmatian, Serbian and Bosnian hinterlands, serving as intermediaries between local producers or suppliers and Venetian traders. The local Slav, Vlach and Greek population also seems to have participated in this network of exchange. Items of export consisted primarily of animal products, wax, salt and foodstuffs such as cereals, olive oil, honey and wine. From the thirteenth century, precious metals extracted from the rich Serbian and Bosnian mines were exported in large quantities to the Adriatic and the Levant. The Balkan hinterland also supplied western markets with slaves. At the same time, manufactured and luxury goods were imported from Italy or the East, to be sold mainly to the Balkan upper classes.

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the intensification of Balkan banditry coincides with the rapid development of trade and the subsequent growth in travel. Insofar as we can tell (it must be remembered that the available evidence is chronologically uneven, as most of our sources, including the detailed court records from the Dubrovnik archives, come from the later period), the problem of banditry became particularly widespread between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. As more people used the overland routes through the Balkans, the number of brigands operating along the way was also bound to grow.

An attempt to sketch out the social and economic background out of which banditry arose has been undertaken in Chaps. 3 and 5. It quickly becomes evident that the habitat for the appearance of this phenomenon is the agro-pastoral society. To be sure, peasants and herdsmen represent the two primary sources of brigandage in the medieval Balkans. But while the latter feature prominently in accounts of criminal activity, there are relatively few reported cases in which bandits are specifically named as peasants. This is not to imply that peasants were not engaged in brigandage; on the contrary, during times of political and military unrest, which were usually marked by a decline of living conditions in rural areas, banditry became an attractive option for a segment of the peasant population. Examples of this can be found throughout the Balkans, including Transylvania following the devastating Mongol invasion of 1241–1242, Thrace and Macedonia at the time of the Catalan invasion in the 1340s, Konavle in southwestern Bosnia in the 1420s, and Banat during the Ottoman attacks of the 1390s. There can be no doubt that men such as these engaged in criminal acts only now and again, as a good opportunity offered. Hard-pressed by the systematic devastation of their land, by excessive taxation or by the limited opportunities for good employment,

they were pushed to banditry (and in some cases to migration) in the hope of securing a little extra income. Against this background, the statement of Matthew of Ephesos that peasants were neither capable nor willing to harm travellers is particularly interesting. It provides sufficient justification for the view that, in Byzantine minds, there was no association between peasant life and banditry.

By contrast, herders carried a reputation of being habitually engaged in rural violence. The reasons for this ultimately lie in the various forms of pressure exerted on them by agricultural societies, particularly the pressures on land. Indeed, flocks and pastures required constant protection, which could only be achieved through the use of arms. Raiding neighbours for livestock or agricultural goods was often unavoidable, and this had the effect of making shepherds skilled in planning and executing small-scale military activities. The pastoral way of life, in other words, encouraged aggression and a willingness to resort to violence. In addition, herders highly valued personal courage and honour, and this undoubtedly reinforced their martial traditions.

In medieval sources, transhumance was particularly associated with the Vlachs. Acts of brigandage perpetrated by members of Vlach communities are recorded across the Balkans. By far the best evidence comes from the State archives of Dubrovnik, which provide information on hundreds of cases of highway and house robberies from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Most of these attacks were carried out in the hinterland of Dubrovnik, especially in the areas commanding the trade routes between the Adriatic coast and the Balkan interior. The perpetrators were frequently local Vlachs, whose main occupation was cattle-breeding. Clearly, banditry constituted another important aspect of their economic activity. These men often targeted caravans or individual traders passing through the region. Their loot included cattle animals, horses, foodstuffs, precious metals, weapons and various sums of money. In addition, they abducted and sold people into slavery.

The evidence from lawsuits and other legal procedures contained in the Dubrovnik archives can reveal a great deal about the inner workings of Vlach banditry. Attacks were typically carried out by members of an extended kin network, made up of both ‘blood’ and ‘marriage’ relations. It was upon this same network that bandits also depended for support and protection. Bribery and gift-giving seem to have served as an essential factor for forging or maintaining bonds of kinship, loyalty and cooperation between its members. The fact that only a very small number of Bosnian

or Dalmatian Vlachs are known to have been punished for banditry in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries shows just how effective this form of social mechanism was.

The mobilization of a relatively broad swathe of the rural population in support of local brigands may suggest that the designation 'bandit communities' is here appropriate. Its members, who were either directly or indirectly involved in criminal activity, shared a set of values which effectively celebrated violence and outlawry: living in a generally deprived environment, they were strongly focused on the acquisition of material goods; they showed contempt for the law and state institutions, and considered cattle-lifting, robbery and murder as deeds of honour; as a result, they idealized bandits, who quickly became the subjects of popular song and story. There can be no doubt that the existence of such parasitical societies, especially in isolated mountainous locales, contributed greatly to the intensity of Balkan brigandage during the medieval and early modern era.

Apart from peasants and herdsmen, two other categories of brigands have been identified in the course of this research. Soldiers account for one of them. Much like pastoralists, soldiers were trained for a lifetime in the profession of arms, and thus were naturally seen as potential bandits. These men were usually driven to crime in two contexts: while on campaign, where the generally poor conditions of service produced low morale and indiscipline. Under these circumstances, they often acted quite contrary to the explicit intentions of their commanders, attacking civilians or plundering the adjacent territories. The other context in which we find soldiers acting as brigands is outside their military environment. The limited opportunities offered to them after active service may have played a role in that. Indeed, life as a bandit was often the only alternative to their destitute existence within the law. The relatively high level of crime within the ranks of medieval armies can be explained in part by the social background of many of these men. There is ample evidence to suggest that Balkan rulers systematically recruited from the fringes of society, for this appeared as a workable solution to both the problem of banditry and the shortage of troops.

Another group that was actively involved in brigandage consisted of men of generally higher social standing. In contrast to soldiers and peasants, these men had considerable wealth and power, and committed crimes which all too often went unpunished because of the important role they played in the political and military affairs of their age. To be sure, in

various parts of the Balkans members of the local nobility either instigated or were directly involved in acts of violence such as robbery, the pillaging of estates and kidnapping. In many cases these crimes fell within the context of aristocratic feuding, which was primarily directed against other nobles' infrastructure. However, very often the motive was none other than material gain. Perhaps the best-known example of a Balkan noble bandit is that of Momčilo, a Bulgarian highwayman who, thanks to his charismatic qualities as a military leader, was able to secure access to positions of authority within the Byzantine hierarchy. The surviving sources, which describe him throughout as a brigand, make it abundantly clear that he saw his involvement in the Byzantine civil war of the mid-fourteenth century as an opportunity to make profit by terrorizing and, no doubt, extorting the rural population in parts of Thrace. Numerous other military commanders carved out careers comparable to that of Momčilo. They surface in the narrative sources during periods of unrest, and almost all of them reflect the shifting loyalties, the opportunism and the volatility of Balkan frontier administration.

Given that the rise of Balkan banditry was linked with a growth in travel, it would be fairly accurate to say that any person on the road represented a potential target for brigands and highwaymen. This is confirmed when we look at the occupational categories of those attacked. The victims came from a wide variety of social and professional backgrounds, from members of the nobility, lay or ecclesiastical officials and merchants to peasants, artisans, monks, hermits and slaves. In many known cases, the bandit's loot was practically worthless. However, as the detailed material from the Dubrovnik archives clearly suggests, very often banditry could prove highly profitable. To protect themselves, some travellers, especially merchants and persons of high status, were escorted by large retinues of armed men; yet it was precisely their retinues that made such personages easily identifiable, and even they were not always spared from attacks by better organized groups. On the other hand, many travelled unescorted, and this clearly increased the risk of being ambushed on the way.

An essential part of this investigation concerns the measures taken by medieval Balkan authorities to control banditry. Their efforts focused on three aims: to prevent criminal activity, to punish bandits and highwaymen, and to protect civilians from attacks. In the first place, the problem was addressed legislatively. A set of laws and degrees issued in Byzantium, Serbia, Bulgaria and the Dalmatian city-states condemned the act and prescribed heavy penalties to offenders. Without doubt, the problem was

most comprehensibly dealt with by Stefan Dušan's law code or *Zakonik* (1349), which contained some fifteen related articles. This shows very clearly that the threat posed by the activity of Serbian brigands was considerable. Among other things, Dušan's code protected merchants and transferred the responsibility of maintaining order in rural areas down to the local authorities and inhabitants. At the same time, harsh penalties were laid down for those who supported brigands, in an attempt to cut the latter out of their social and economic framework.

In addition to legislating, Balkan governments took a number of active steps to prevent or counter the threat of banditry. An immediate priority was to organize locally based police bodies in the countryside. Under the overall supervision of an officer who, in Byzantium, Serbia and Bulgaria, appears to have held civil, judicial and military powers, these forces were to provide guard services (often financed by the peasantry), particularly along important roads and highways. There is good reason to suppose that these units were very much rooted in local society, recruited regionally from rural communities. Overall, it is clear that their reliability and effectiveness were questionable at best.

To supplement security in rural areas in the late medieval period, state authorities and private landowners carried out extensive programmes of constructing watchtowers and other fortified structures in several parts of the Balkans. These were specifically designed to provide protection against brigands, pirates and small raiding parties. Remnants of such structures are still visible today in the region of Chalkidike, the lower Strymon and Mount Athos, although the evidence from written sources points to the existence of towers and forts with similar functions in Thrace, northwestern Macedonia, Serbia and Dalmatia.

The actual impact of all these measures is difficult to assess. While there can be no doubt that, as a result of the efforts of central and local authorities, certain areas, during certain periods, remained relatively secure, the overall impression is that banditry continued to fester across the Balkans, particularly from the thirteenth century onwards. The evidence drawn from the Dubrovnik archives leads to exactly the same conclusion: the hundreds of recorded lawsuits against brigands attest to the intensity and persistence of the problem along the western Balkan road network. In this light, one may suspect that the legislative and administrative measures discussed above did not, on the whole, act as an effective deterrent to banditry.

While brigandage in the medieval Balkans exhibited its own particular characteristics, the phenomenon cannot be fully understood unless it is placed within a broader European context. To be sure, comparison between Balkan and western European evidence reveals very similar patterns of criminal behaviour. Just as in the Balkans, large parts of western Europe were plagued by crime and public disorder, which were exacerbated during periods of political, military or social unrest. The weight of the burden imposed on peasants during wartime, as well as heavy demographic pressures and natural disasters, were some of the reasons for the rise of banditry among the rural population. The evidence pertaining to the involvement in criminal activities of soldiers and members of the nobility is, likewise, comparable to that of the Balkans. Soldiers represented perhaps the best documented source of brigandage in the West, although, here too, much of the pillaging and robbery carried out by them was caused by desperation. Thus, after the end of their service, most notably in France during the Hundred Years War, many professional or semi-professional troops went on to form robber bands, which preyed indiscriminately on friendly or enemy territory. At the same time, there are numerous examples of criminal gangs consisting of members of the landed gentry, most of them coming from fourteenth-century England. As a rule, these men used their influence to terrorize the rural population in order to extend their wealth and power; however, many of them were also directly involved in criminal acts. Significantly, they often enjoyed the favour of powerful patrons, who were prepared to assist them for a share of the booty or for illegal services rendered. Various attempts were made to deal with the threat posed by brigands throughout western Europe, including the introduction of new institutions with special judicial or policing functions, but on the whole, very little result was obtained.

The intensity of the problem of banditry in several western kingdoms certainly accounts for the fascination of medieval men with tales of outlaws. The outlaw hero tradition is most evident in England, where the first of such figures appears as early as the eleventh or twelfth century. By far the most important among them is Robin Hood, who represents principled resistance to corrupt authority, although his ballads, which were widely diffused across a diverse audience, might not be necessarily interpreted as a set of complaints on behalf of the have-nots. A similarly rich oral tradition of ballads and heroic songs that celebrated the deeds of real or fictitious outlaws (known as *hajduks*, *uskoks* and *klephts*) is clearly attested in the Balkans from the early Ottoman period. Just as in western

Europe, these men were highly romanticized fighters for freedom and justice, who gradually came to symbolize the spirit of resistance to an oppressive foreign rule. It is not unlikely that a number of folk songs and tales actually originated during the Middle Ages, and, in fact, some of their protagonists are well-remembered medieval figures. However, the latter did not operate within their original historical setting; the accounts in question are set in a very different context that was completely unrelated to the world of the medieval bandit.

As noted already, banditry continued to pose a serious threat to public security in the Balkans during the Ottoman era, but some of its main characteristics evolved significantly over time. Even though economic incentives were certainly present, the—highly romanticizing—sources of the period emphasize the socio-political goals of these men. Thus, the Ottoman/post-Ottoman bandit was primarily seen as a fighter for freedom, a bringer of justice and a defender of the faith. For the medieval brigand, on the other hand, the motive to become an outlaw was mainly economic. He was either trying to escape from the often-dreadful poverty and living conditions found in rural areas, or was attracted by the opportunities offered by the growth of Balkan trade and travel. To be sure, for many of these men violence was a normal part of everyday life. It was present in a predominant manner in the peasant and pastoral societies, either as a means of acquiring and protecting vital resources, or as an accepted medium for the resolution of disputes and the furtherance of personal or family interests. Given the regularity with which individuals were involved in violence, it is hardly surprising that banditry was so widespread in the medieval Balkans. It was merely another form of violent behaviour, just one piece of a complex phenomenon.

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