Article

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Abstract: The Crusaders who followed Via militaris or Via Egnatia to the Holy Land traversed the vast and more or less unknown region of the Balkans, where they found themselves in an unfamiliar natural environment. This article explores the physical and psychological effects experienced by the Crusaders in this environment as recorded in their chronicles and accounts of pilgrimages. The purpose of this study is to investigate how nature affected the Crusaders and what they thought about it. When chroniclers write about nature in the Balkans, they emphasize its desolation, inaccessibility and remoteness from any established society and civilization. The portrayals of the wild and treacherous environment align with the stories about the Balkan people and their brutish customs, “barbarous” language, and way of life. Overall, these descriptions are based on the contrasting concepts of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, ‘barbarism’ and ‘civilization’, ‘chaos’ and ‘order’, and so forth.

Keywords: Crusades; medieval Balkans; perception of nature; human environmental interaction in the Middle Ages

1. Introduction

As is well known, the Crusaders who chose a land route to the Holy Land traveled through the Balkans to Constantinople along two ancient Roman roads. One of these routes, the Via Militaris, began in Belgrade and passed through Serdica (Sofia), Philippopolis, and Adrianople. The other road, the Via Egnatia, connected Dyrrachium on the Adriatic coast with Thessaloniki on the Aegean Sea coast intersecting with the Via Militaris near Adrianople (Jiereček 1877; Larnach 2016; Riedler and Stefanov 2021). By following these paths, Western Christians crossed vast lands of the Balkan Peninsula, which were mostly under the rule of the Byzantine Empire at that time.

For the participants of the Crusades, the Balkans represented a true terra incognita—a region that was geographically close but largely unknown and perilous. It was a place where pilgrims only began venturing in the 11th century following the conversion of Hungary to Christianity, embarking on their hazardous journeys. In essence, the Crusaders were pioneers among Western Christians, being first to explore this region.

The events related to the Crusaders’ march through the Balkans have long fascinated historians, who have explored various issues such as the Crusaders’ passage through the Balkans and their political interactions with Byzantium (Runciman 1949). Additionally, they have examined conflicts and encounters between Balkan people and Crusaders (Gagova 1997; Koytcheva 2002) as well as the depiction of the Balkans (Fejić 1996; Nebojša 2002; Uzelac 2017) in travel accounts and Crusader chronicles. However, within the already extensive literature on this topic, with few exceptions (Dall’Aglia 2010), little attention has been given to how the Crusaders perceived the natural environment they encountered during their journey across the Balkan Peninsula.

Covering a distance of almost 1000 km, the Crusaders confronted unfamiliar natural and climatic conditions in the Balkans. They endured both cold and heat, witnessed unusual atmospheric phenomena, and were compelled to blaze trails through untouched
forests, cross mountains, and traverse tumultuous mountain rivers. How did the Crusaders engage with nature in the Balkans? Was their relationship with nature purely utilitarian or could they admire it? Did they have a sense for nature? How did the environment influence the Crusaders, and how did they describe the natural phenomena they encountered?

The relevance of these inquiries is practically justified in the present, as medievalists are increasingly emphasizing the interaction between humans and the natural environment in their research. They investigate the transformations that occurred in nature over time, its active role in societal life, and the ways in which people in the past engaged with their surrounding (Aberth 2013; Hoffmann 2014; Williard 2020). Historians are also interested in understanding how people’s perception of nature evolved throughout different eras and to what extent their ideas and values influenced the relationship between humans and the natural world (Classen 2015, 2018).

In order to align this study with a contemporary perspective, I have set two primary goals in mind. Firstly, I seek to understand the physical impact of natural phenomena that the Crusaders encountered on their journey. Secondly, by drawing upon accounts of pilgrims and the chronicles of the first three Crusades, I will try to explore how the Crusaders perceived and depicted the landscapes of the Balkan region. I will analyze the rhetorical devices employed in describing these landscapes and examine how these descriptions evolved over time, from one military-religious expedition to another. This article serves as an endeavor to provide answers to these inquiries.

2. ‘Silva Bulgarica’ as Viewed by the First Crusade Chroniclers

Starting from the spring of 1096, several waves of armed groups passed through the Balkans. Even before the start of the First Crusade, squads led by Walter the Penniless journeyed through the Via Militaris, followed by the army of Peter the Hermit, described as “countless, like the sand of the sea” (Albert of Aachen 2007, p. 12). Subsequently, Crusader forces from the Rhineland region moved rapidly along the old Roman road. Finally, in August 1096, the army of Godefroy de Bouillon passed through these lands. The chronicles of the First Crusade primarily portray conflicts, frequently brutal and bloody, between the Crusaders and the local population. The locals were unwilling to engage with the unruly participants of the “peasants’ crusade” and refused to provide them with provisions. However, both during the initial stage of the campaign led by Godfrey of Bouillon and in subsequent Crusades, the Crusader army encountered significant challenges in sustaining itself. The Byzantine administration, apprehensive of a recurrence of conflicts reluctantly fulfilled its obligation to supply the warriors. All these circumstances had a profound influence on how the Crusaders perceived the unfamiliar region, including its natural environment and the local inhabitants.

Before the Crusaders reach the Via Militaris, they traverse Hungary, which directly borders on the Balkan region. In the chronicles, it is depicted as a frontier country, isolated from the outside world and inaccessible for “it is swampy in many places and is also encircled by great rivers” (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, pp. 140–41). The rivers of Hungary such as the Danube, along with its tributaries—the Sava, Drava, Morava, and Leitha—are described primarily in the texts as natural boundaries providing protections to the country comparable to fortress walls (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 156; Albert of Aachen 2007, p. 52). The chroniclers almost say nothing about the rivers themselves that serve only as geographical markers. For example, medieval authors highlight that Leitha serves as the westernmost boundary of the country (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 161; Albert of Aachen 2007, p. 62), while the Sava River known as the border of the kingdom (regni limes) marks its eastern frontier (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 141). In the medieval texts, this river is portrayed as a significant obstacle in the way of the Crusaders. The soldiers of Peter the Hermit, and later of Godfrey of Bouillon, managed to cross it only by constructing makeshift rafts from logs.

Upon crossing the Sava River, the Crusaders arrived at the starting point of Via Militaris which was the city of Belgrade (known as Bellegrava). Belgrade is situated on the right bank
of the river, opposite the Hungarian town of Zemun (Malevilla) on the left bank, where the first clashes between the Crusaders and the local population took place. As Belgrade was part of the Byzantine theme of Bulgaria, the Sava River served as both geographical and cultural boundary, separating Byzantium from the Western Christian world.

Judging from the chronicles of the Crusades, it becomes evident that Western writers had restricted and ambiguous understanding of the term “Bulgaria”. Within these texts, it was used to denote a broader geographical region encompassing most of the western part of the Balkan Peninsula, stretching from the territory east of the Sava River to the Adriatic Sea. It did not specifically refer to the Byzantine theme of Bulgaria. The Crusader chronicler William of Tyre provided a relatively clear description of this region, drawing on the chronicles of the First Crusade (Edbury and Rowe 1988; Knoch 1966). The author constructs his narrative by highlighting the contrast between “barbarism” and “civilization”, thus emphasizing the “otherness” of the region. Indeed, the chronicler attributes various Balkan provinces of the Byzantine Empire, such as Thessaly, Macedonia, Thrace, which were invaded by Slavic tribes to the term “Bulgaria”. According to the chronicler, it was these barbarian nations (barbarae nationes), among which the main one was “the uncivilized race of Bulgars that had seized all the countries from the Danube to the ‘royal city’ [Constantinopile], and, again, from the same river to the Adriatic Sea”. At the same time, when describing the Crusaders’ journey through these lands, William of Tyre, along with other chroniclers, employs the toponym “Bulgaria” in a more specific sense. In this context, “Bulgaris” refers to the portion of the route that the crusaders traveled along the Via Militaris, which passed through the Balkan Mountains encompassing such towns as Niš and Serdica (known to the Crusaders as Stralitsa) and continued towards Maritsa Riverplain (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 166). By using the term “Bulgaria” in this manner, the chroniclers focus on the specific path taken by the crusaders rather than a broader geographical or historical scope.

Leaving Belgrade, the Crusaders made their way through Bulgaria, discovering novel landscapes in this region. While rivers characterized the landscape in Hungary, which borders the Balkans, forests were the predominant feature in Bulgaria. The Western knights first crossed Šumadija, a region located in Central Serbia that was once abundant in beech and oak forests (Larnach 2016, p. 143), before continuing their journey through present-day Bulgaria. The chronicles frequently make reference to the “Bulgarian forest” (silva Bulgarica) and “Bulgarian groves” (nemora Bulgarorum), vast and dark forests and thickets that instilled fear and trepidation to the Crusaders.

As is known, forests held a significant place in the symbolic imagination of the Middle Ages. They were often associated with “wild” spaces and portrayed as dangerous, ominous, and beyond the reach of human laws (Sandidge 2015). During the Early Middle Ages, from the fall of Rome until the beginning of the 12th century, vast areas of Western Europe remained uncultivated and were covered with forest. These vast woodlands were perceived as chaotic realms where demons and the devil resided and where pagans set up their altars and shrines. However, by the 12th century, such extensive pristine forests in Western Europe were almost non-existent. Through the process of internal colonization, new territories were cleared from nature for agricultural purposes (Aberth 2013, pp. 77–138).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the “warriors of Christ” regarded the silva Bulgarica as a rather extraordinary phenomenon. Albert of Aachen, with astonishment, recounts in his chronicle about the “immense and unheard-of forests” (siluas immensas et inauditas regni Bulgarorum) and “enormous and extensive groves of the Bulgars” (ingentia et spaciosissima nemora Bulgarorum) (Albert of Aachen 2007, p. 70) that the Crusaders had to traverse. According to William of Tyre, the Western warriors, following the Via Militaris, passed through “vast woods and groves of Bulgaria” (Bulgaria siluis et late patentia nemora) (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 165), encountering “extensive forests” (sylvas longe lateque diffusas) (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 142) along their journey.

According to chroniclers, the “forests of Bulgaria” symbolized the untamed nature that stood in stark contrast with the cultivated surroundings. This was characterized by its inaccessibility, desolation, and detachment from civilization. The Crusaders, who relied
on Byzantium for provisions, seldom encountered people in the deserted and treacherous “Bulgarian forests”. Upon learning of the arrival of the Western warriors, few inhabitants withdrew with their belongings and livestock deep into the “dark forests and impassable groves” (opaca silvarum et nemorum abdita), as reported by chronicler William of Tyre in his Chronicle (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 143). This literary motif is commonly found in medieval literature, where dark forests with shadowy corners, “as if they were secluded from the sky”, are contrasted with sunny places (Isidorus Hispalensis 1911, col. 34). Chroniclers inform us that within the somber “Bulgarian forests,” there are also “concealed places” (siluarum latebrae), where people seek refuge from danger. Following a bloody clash with the Bulgarians, Peter the Hermit’s warriors sought shelter in these forest hideouts to evade the retaliation from the enemy (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 147).

Forests were known as places where roads are scarce, and it is easy to become disoriented. After the Zemun robbery, the participants of the “Crusade of the Poor” crossed the Sava River and spent eight days traversing a vast expanse of woodland (salto spaciosissimo), until forest trails eventually guided them to their next stop along the Via Militaris—the city of Niš, situated on the banks of the Nišava river. Unexpectedly, we encounter a passage within these narratives that depicts a picturesque location. After crossing the river on a stone bridge, the warriors set up their tents on a meadow described as “delightful in its greenness and wide extent” (partum uiriditate et amplitudine voluptuosa) (Albert of Aachen 2007, p. 18). This meadow serves as an example of a locus amoenus (Curtius 1993, pp. 191–209), an ideal landscape that captivates the eyes of knights and provides aesthetic pleasure.

However, nature was not a subject of admiration for the Crusaders. Instead, the forests served as a haven for local inhabitants who, to the astonishment of the Crusaders seeking assistance from Byzantium, confronted the participants of the campaign with hostility. It was within the forests near Niš that clashes between the Crusaders and the “Bulgarians” took place, leading to the dispersion Peter the Hermit’s army amidst the “thick and extensive woodland, steep slopes of the mountains and deserted places” (per opacum et spaciosum nemus, . . . per abrupta montium et deserta loca) (Albert of Aachen 2007, p. 24; Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 147).

The topos of “deserted places” (loca deserta), frequently mentioned by chroniclers, along with other topoi (such as “dark forests”—opaca silvarum), was already prevalent in medieval texts describing “Bulgaria” in the 11th century (Uzelac 2017, pp. 196–98). This motif plays a significant role in the narrative development of chroniclers’ accounts of Balkan nature. It involves a specific rhetoric that medieval authors use to depict the march of the Crusaders: the warriors constantly encounter both “deserted places” (loca deserta), “extensive woodland” (nemus spaciosum), and “steep mountains” (abrupta montium).

As is well known, during the Middle Ages, “loca deserta” could be identified with both forests and mountains (Le Goff 1999). Using this topos, medieval historians portrayed pristine wild nature, emphasizing its contrast with civilization. It is no coincidence that Isidore of Seville, the father of the Western Christian Church, contrasted “loca deserta” with cultivated landscapes. In his view, “wildernesses” referred to forests and mountains (loci silvarum et montium) and were so designated because these lands were not plowed or sown (seruntur) but rather abandoned (deseruntur), unlike cultivated fields and “fertile soil” (uberrimae glebae) (Isidorus Hispalensis 1911, col. 524).

The descriptions of “loca deserta” in the chronicles of the Crusades are explicitly based on the “nature–culture” antithesis, which is a prominent feature of medieval tradition (Le Goff 1999, pp. 495–99). Within the chronicles of the First Crusade, which describe the crossing of “Bulgaria”, this dichotomy becomes apparent through the contrast between uninhabited landscapes and forests, “wilderness” (loca deserta), and the cultivated land.

The “nature–culture” dichotomy present in the texts is intertwined with the opposition of “civilization–barbarism”, as described in William of Tyre’s account of “Bulgaria”. Within his chronicle, he draws a comparison between the vast region, which was conquered from Byzantium and inhabited by barbarian nations, and the once prosperous Roman provinces
that previously thrived in that same territory but are now in a wretched state (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 166).

Moreover, as emphasized by the chronicler, the conversion of “Bulgaria” into a deserted, forested region, a realm of wild nature, is primarily attributed to human actions. According to his perspective, this transformation aligns with the intentions of the Byzantine authorities, who seek to isolate and render the region inaccessible:

No one was permitted to occupy or cultivate (introire uel excoli) the land in the more remote provinces. Especially this was the case in those which borders on foreign kingdoms and through which their own lands are approached . . . Since the whole country is covered with woods and shrubby growth, no one, however desirous, can enter there. For the Greeks place greater confidence in the hindrances afforded by difficult roads and the defenses of thorny brambles then in their own forces. (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 166; trans. Babcock and Krey 1943, p. 122)

In his account of the Crusaders’ journey through the lands of “Bulgaria”, William of Tyre presents a depiction of the region as abandoned, which the Western knights traversed. It was only after crossing these vast and uninhabited forested areas that the Crusaders, led by Godfrey of Bouillon, reached a flat plain, in the valley of the Maritsa River. This is where they encountered the “beautiful and wealthy city of Philippopolis”. After traversing the vast and uninhabited forested region, the Crusaders were provided with abundant food supplies and all necessary provisions (omnia habundantiam necessariorum) by order of the Byzantine Emperor (Albert of Aachen 2007, p. 72).

3. Following the Via Egnatia

In addition to the region commonly referred to as Bulgaria, chroniclers describe another geographic area that the Crusaders became acquainted with during their travels along the Via Egnatia.

3.1. Following the Via Egnatia: Dalmatia, “Tellus Deserta”

Raymond IV, count of Toulouse, accompanied by Bishop Ademar de Puy, embarked on a journey along the Via Egnatia, traversing Albania, Macedonia, and Greece. Departing in October 1096, their troops traveled through Lombardy, Istria, Dalmatia, and Zeta during the winter months reaching the port of Dyrrhachium in early 1097, where the Via Egnatia commenced. Chroniclers who documented their expedition provided valuable insights, especially regarding Dalmatia, a region relatively unfamiliar to the Christian West (Ilieva and Delev 1998, pp. 153–71). It seems that the Crusaders themselves did not show any particular interest in the region’s nature, as they did not even take note of it. Nevertheless, they did experience the physical effects of natural phenomena, which were subsequently reported by historians of the Crusades reported in their accounts (Richard 1986, pp. 27–39).

According to the descriptions provided, the Crusaders entered this region having “found many difficulties along the road, particularly because of the rough country and because the winter season was at hand” (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 183). One chronicler even likened their 40-day journey through Dalmatia to Moses’ wandering in the desert, implying the arduous nature of their expedition. The Crusaders frequently encountered fog and rain, which induced a sense of panic among them. At certain moments during their voyage, the fog was so dense that they could physically feel it pushing it aside with their hands (Raymond d’Aguilers 1969, p. 36).

As described by William of Tyre, “the air was full of mist, and the continual shadows were so thick that they were almost palpable. The people behind could scarcely distinguish those ahead of them, while the advanced guard could see the road only at a stone’s throw ahead” (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 183). We do not know how realistic these descriptions were. However, what remains evident is that nature and the climate in unfamiliar lands were subjectively experienced by the travelers, often instilling fear and anxiety.

The descriptions of Dalmatia’s nature heavily rely on the chronicles’ accounts of fog and humid climate. According to William of Tyre, the entire country “abounded in rivers
and streams and was almost wholly marshland, and each day there arose from this source so much dampness and thick mist that the air became almost stifling” (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, pp. 183–84). Similar to Bulgaria, chroniclers portray Dalmatia as a desolate landscape, emphasizing its isolation from the outside world. Raymond of Aguilers remarks that “Dalmatia is a deserted (tellus deserta), impassable, and mountainous land where we did not see any wild animals or birds for three weeks” (Raymond d’Aguilers 1969, p. 36).

The inhabitants of the region, portrayed as rough and feral (incolae rudes et agrestes), perfectly match the wild nature of the area. They refused to engage in trade with the warriors, leading to the Crusaders’ suffering from severe hunger and a lack of food and supplies (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 184). As the Crusader army approached, the locals fled with their families and all their belongings, as if they were escaping from wild animals (quasi agrestes fere configientes), seeking refuge in the mountains and dense forests (ad montes et siluarum condensa). During the nights, they would raid the participants of the Crusade (Raymond d’Aguilers 1969, pp. 37–38). According to the chronicler, these unarmed thieves (latrones inermes) often pursued the Crusaders, but instead of engaging in open combat, they barbarically targeted defenseless pilgrims who had joined the army. Consequently, the locals did not actively seek battle, but they were not averse to engaging in conflict when necessary.

Due to their familiarity with the area, the Dalmatian Slavs were adept at evading Western knights during attacks on the Crusader army by retreating into the “dense forests and steep mountains” (per abrupta montium et condensa silvarum). The rocky terrain and untamed nature of the region served as the primary refuge for the locals, offering them a strategic advantage in their resistance against the Crusaders. As chroniclers emphasized, capturing the Dalmatians proved a challenge due to the nearby forests providing excellent cover, enabling them to easily hide themselves and navigate through the terrain. The “Dalmatian Slavs” (Sclavi Dalmatae), who closely trailed the army through “steep mountains and dense woods” (abrupta montium et nemorum condensa) would often emerge from the forests to launch surprise attacks on the Crusaders.

On the other hand, the count and other leaders frequently repelled surprise attacks by the Slavs, utilizing arrows to strike down many of them and swords to cut them down. Raymond of Aguilers notes that they would have killed even more locals if not for the “proximity of the forests” (silvae habentes vicinas), which the Dalmatians utilized as their “nearest refuge” (presens remedium) (Raymond d’Aguilers 1969, pp. 37–38). According to the chroniclers’ accounts, the Slavs dwell within forest thickets, much as wild beasts in their natural environment. Essentially, the locals are an inherent product of nature. The natural conditions of Dalmatia are as disadvantageous to the Crusaders as the Dalmatian Slavs are rugged and hostile towards them. Medieval authors depict them as true barbarians, prone to robbery and looting, thereby justifying the violence enacted upon them from the Crusaders’ perspective. As Raymond of Aguilers narrates, it transpired that on a fatal day, a few of these “villains” were apprehended. The count ordered someone to sever their hands and feet, while others were tasked to cut off their noses and gouge out their eyes, hoping that this punishment would instill fear in the remaining Slavs, dissuading them from following the army (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, pp. 183–84).

In the chronicles, the inhabitants of the region are portrayed as an undifferentiated mass, and employing the topoi dating back to ancient historiography (Jones 2009, pp. 347–78), the writers construct a generalized portrayal of “barbarians”—fierce, cruel, and wild creatures. The chroniclers depict the Crusaders as confronting the untamed nature of Dalmatia and its populace. These depictions by medieval authors are founded on the principle of contrasting nature and culture, barbarism and civilization.

Such perception of the region is reflected in the generalizing account presented by William of Tyre in his narrative on Dalmatia. According to his viewpoint, the Slavic way of life is shaped and influenced by the specific natural conditions of the region. He argues
that the abundance of mountains, forests, rivers, and pastures discourages the inhabitants from pursuing agriculture, which is also a sign of barbarism. The Dalmatian Slavs rely on pillaging as a means of sustenance rather than cultivating the land.

This land is inhabited by very fierce people given over to plunder and murder. The land is entirely occupied by mountains and wood, by great rivers, widely extending pastures, so that there is little cultivation of the fields, except occasionally here and there. The inhabitants depend for their living entirely upon their flocks and herds in their way of life. (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 183; trans. Babcock and Krey 1943, p. 140)

At the same time, William of Tyre draws a comparison between the inland mountainous region and the coastal area of Dalmatia, expressing a positive view of its natural landscape which includes the sea and the coastline. According to William of Tyre, a few of the inhabitants “dwell on the seacoast and . . . differ from the rest in customs and language. These use the Latin idiom, while all the other natives employ the Slavonic tongue and have the habits of barbarians” (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 183).

In contrast to the coastal region, the inland Dalmatia, which Raymond of Toulouse and his army traversed, is depicted by chroniclers as a wild and deserted land, a realm of uncultivated nature. It remains unclear whether the chroniclers regarded the inhabitants of this region, with whom the Crusaders had to contend during their passage through the dangerous region, to be Christian or not. Nevertheless, the descriptions of the wild nature of the Balkan landscapes and the coarse behavior of the people portray the region as distinctly different and emphasize its otherness, thereby drawing parallels to the pagan world.

Raymond of Aguilers summarizes the difficulties experienced by the Crusaders in Dalmatia, as he pens the following lines:

I believe that for this reason God wished our army to pass through Slavonia so that the wild people, who do not know God, would learn about the virtues and patience of the knights of the Lord, and either become less rough or stand before the judgment of God. (Raymond d’Aguilers 1969, p. 37)

After traversing Dalmatia, Raymond of Toulouse’s army reached the city of Dyrrhachium (Guillaume de Tyr, p. 183). However, the chronicles of Raymond of Aguilers and William of Tyre do not provide detailed accounts of the Crusaders’ subsequent journey along Via Egnatia which led them through the territories corresponding to present-day Albania, Macedonia, and Greece until they reach the via Regia.

3.2. Following the Via Egnatia: “Bulgarorum Regiones”

However, this route is extensively covered in other texts, such as the work of Fulcher of Chartres, who was the chaplain of Count Stephen of Chartres and traveled from Dyrrhachium to Constantinople with Duke Robert of Normandy (Filiposki 2017, pp. 113–30). On 5 April 1097, they sailed from the port of Brindisi and reached Dyrrhachium four days later. From there they continued their journey along the Via Egnatia. According to the chronicler, it was a difficult passage through the “lands of Bulgaria” “across steep mountains and deserted areas” (Fulcherius Carnotensis 1913, p. 172). In describing the Crusaders’ journey, Fulcher of Chartres, similar to other chroniclers, emphasizes the emptiness and uninhabited nature of these regions, in which dangers lurked around every corner for the Crusaders. One notable event that left a lasting impression on the Crusaders was their crossing of a hazardous mountain river, locally known as the river of the Demon (flumen Daemonis) due to its reputation for danger and adversity. This extremely dramatic episode made a great impression on the Crusaders. This is how Fulcher vividly describes the episode: “Right before our eyes, many common people who hoped to cross the river on foot were suddenly swept away by the force of the swift current and drowned”. Despite the knights’ efforts to assist the infantrymen during the perilous reiver crossing, there were still a lot of victims. The historian poignantly reflects on this tragic episode, stating, “We shed many tears over these unfortunate people” (Fulcherius Carnotensis 1913, p. 172). Once the Crusaders had crossed the treacherous river, they set up camp in an uninhabited place, surrounded on
all sides by barren mountains (montes vasti). Not a single local resident was visible (nemo incola parebat), emphasizing the desolation of the area. The next day, as dawn broke (aurora clarescente), the Crusaders “hurried on the sound of signal trumpets” and commenced their ascent of the Bagulatus Mountain, also known as Baba Mountain. This mountain range is known to be one of the highest in the Balkans (Zlatarski 1933, pp. 187–90). Although the chronicler does not provide a detailed description of this geographical reality, it serves as the starting point for his narrative of the Crusaders’ progression through a completely uninhabited and perilous region.

After leaving the mountainous terrain behind, the Crusaders continued their journey along the Via Egnatia and reached the bank of the Vardar River, one of the largest rivers traversing Macedonia and Greece. Fulcherius recounts that, “with God’s help” (opitulante Deo) the Crusaders successfully and joyfully crossed it on foot. They then pitched their tents in front of the city of Thessaloniki the following day, where they encamped for a duration of four days.

According to the testimonies of Fulcher of Chartres and other medieval writers, the journey along the Via Egnatia proved to be very difficult and hazardous. The Crusaders encountered not only natural obstacles such as fast-flowing mountain rivers and impassable mountains but also traversed a wild land, where warriors had to confront the harsh realities of the Balkan nature unaided. Wherever they looked, they saw everywhere “wildernesses” (loca deserta) and desolate landscapes, which left them vulnerable to hunger and devoid of the means to secure necessary provisions for their army.

It is indeed interesting to note that depictions of other Crusaders who also traveled along the Via Egnatia, present a contrasting image of the Balkan landscape. For instance, during the winter of 1097, the knights led by Robert of Flanders crossed the Strait of Otranto and spent their winter in Dyrrachium. In this account they discovered a “fertile country full of all kinds of commodities” nestled amidst woods and pasture (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 181). Similarly, upon reaching western Macedonia, Bohemond of Taranto and Tancred found an “immeasurable abundance of grain and wine and other provisions” (Hill 1962, p. 8). In the chronicles, there is a notable instance where the route taken by the Crusaders through the Balkans is described as passing through Christian countries. Bohemond of Taranto addressed his warriors, urging them to remember that they were “pilgrims of God” and should be “good and humble” (boni et humiles). Consequently, he admonishes them not to plunder “lands belonging to Christians and . . . . take more from those who live there than necessary for sustenance” (Hill 1962, p. 8). This passage underscores the recognition within the Crusader ranks that they were traversing lands inhabited by co-religionists and highlights Bohemond’s appeal for respectful conduct towards fellow Christians on their journey.

According to historical accounts, the inhabitants of the blessed land, similar to those of the “deserted places” (loca deserta), mistakenly identified the Crusaders as bandits and fled from them, rejecting any form of trade (Petrus Tudebodus, p. 41). In their persistent attempts to establish contact with the local population through force, the knights resorted to seizing their livestock and draft animals, albeit with little success. Upon reaching Pelagonia, the Crusaders came across a gathering of local Christians whom they deemed to be heretics. The warriors launched an attack on their camp, setting it ablaze, and claimed the loot as their rightful spoils. They considered the plunder to be fair and were greatly incensed when they unexpectedly encountered a Byzantine army stationed on the banks of the Vardar River, prepared to retaliate for their aggressive attack (Petrus Tudebodus 1977, pp. 8–9).

In subsequent decades, William of Tyre, drawing on the knowledge of his predecessors, wrote a few lines about the lands lying along the Via Egnatia and provided an evaluation of the natural resources of this region. Throughout the text, a recurring theme emerges, highlighting contrasting concepts such as “culture versus nature” and “barbarism versus civilization”. When examining these lands through the lens of ancient culture, the historian reminds us of the prosperous kingdom of Epirus whose capital resided in the city of Dyrrhachium. The boundaries of this kingdom stretched from this city to Mount Bagulatus.
According to William of Tyre, the Byzantine rulers have transformed Epirus into “a wilderness bare of inhabitants” (desertam et habitatoribus vacuam), a realm dominated by untamed nature. “In these lands,” as he says, “there are only deserted woods and pathless wilds’ (nemora deserta et invia), and there are “no roads or provisions to be found” (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 166). He believes that this circumstance will be an insurmountable obstacle for anyone seeking to traverse this region, particularly future Crusaders (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 166).

It is evident that William of Tyre, similar to many chroniclers of the Crusades, primarily assesses the natural world of the Balkans from a utilitarian perspective. He does not dedicate attention to natural phenomena and does not record them in his chronicle. However, it is important to note that not all medieval authors who wrote about the difficult journey of the crusaders through the Balkans shared such an attitude towards nature. For instance, Odo of Deuil, a participant of the Second Crusade, traveled along the Via Militaris in the summer of 1147 and provided a guide for future Crusaders (Phillips 2003, pp. 80–95).

In his travel notes, Odo of Deuil offers a relatively precise and detailed description of the Balkan landscapes.

### 4. The Second Crusade. Balkan Landscapes as Viewed by Odon of Deuil

The chronicler, Odo of Deuil, recounts the Crusaders’ journey through Hungary, depicting it as “covered with lakes, swamps, and springs” (Eudes de Deuil 1949, p. 35). He highlights his fascination with the “crystal-clear river”, the Danube, and another powerful river, the Drava, with its uneven banks. Additionally, he expresses astonishment at the discovery of the thermal springs that can be unexpectedly unearthed while digging into the ground (Eudes de Deuil 1949, p. 35).

According to Odo of Deuil’s account, the Crusaders departed from the Kingdom of Hungary and crossed the Sava River, eventually reaching Belgrade. This city was situated in Bulgarian lands that were under the control of the Byzantine Empire. The chronicler described the area between Bratisevo and Niš as either “a pasture covered with forest,” or “a forest covered with pastures” (pratum est nemorosum, vel nemus pabulosum) (Eudes de Deuil 1949, p. 37). He traced the route of the Crusaders along the Via Militaris passing through the cities of Niš, Sredets, Philippopolis, etc. Odo of Deuil realistically depicted nature in the region referred to as “Bulgaria” in the chronicle. According to him, “it abounds in crops that grow on their own; the land would be suitable for other crops as well if the peasants grew them” (Eudes de Deuil 1949, p. 43). The chronicler, who was evidently sensible to nature, immortalized vivid depictions of the landscapes he encountered during his journey along the Via Militaris:

> The land is not entirely flat like a plain, nor is it is dominated by mountains. Instead, it is characterized by gentle hills that are ideal for vineyards and cultivating crops. Streams and crystal-clear springs provide ample irrigation throughout the region...The cities of Niš, Sredets, Philippopolis, and Adrianople are separated by a four days’ journey from one other. The vast expanse between them is a flat terrain adorned with cities and castles, boasting abundant resources of all kinds. On either side, mountains grace the landscape, distinctly visible to the eye but adequately spaced apart, allowing for the presence of a broad, fertile, and prosperous plain. (Eudes de Deuil 1949, p. 43)

During a brief detour through Greece and Macedonia, which the Crusaders traversed, the chronicler observed and commented in his customary manner that “from Bulgaria to Constantinople itself, lies a land of extraordinary abundance and breathtaking beauty and beautiful land”. Nevertheless, Odo of Deuil laments the fact that the locals’ reluctance to engage in interactions and trade with the Crusader army in this bountiful and fertile land resulted in deprivation and hardship for the Crusaders (Eudes de Deuil 1949, p. 43). Despite encountering inhospitable locals who only offered sustenance by lowering it in baskets on rope from fortress walls, the chronicler still admired the beauty of the landscapes.

Among the chroniclers Odo of Deuil stands out as one of the rare writers who offers a vivid and authentic portrayal of the natural environment and material reality. While
many chroniclers provide only brief descriptions of actual landscapes, often relying on conventional literary motifs, Odo distinguishes himself among the Crusader chroniclers through his genuine fascination with the natural world. His direct interest in capturing the essence of the environment sets him apart as a chronicler of the Crusades.

What new insights and perspectives did chroniclers bring to their narratives during the Third Crusade? We will now turn to its history.

5. The Third Crusade: Frederick Barbarossa’s Crossing along the Via Militaris

In this campaign, the army of Frederick I set out on an expedition along the Via Militaris. As was customary, prior to setting foot on Balkan lands, the Crusader army traversed the Kingdom of Hungary (Ansbertus 1928, p. 27; Arnoldus Lubicensis 1868, p. 171). The participants of the Third Crusade, being keen observers, provided intriguing accounts of Hungary’s climate and weather. According to Ansbert, a cleric and chronicler of Frederick I’s expedition, the Crusaders passed through the Kingdom of Hungary without any noteworthy incidents:

*a milder climate than usual smiled upon us, so that midges, gnats, flies and serpents which had much annoyed us as we travelled on horseback through the summer heat in Hungary did not harm either us or our animals, something that we had rarely experienced as we journeyed through Hungary.* (Ansbertus 1928, p. 27; trans. Loud 2016, p. 69)

Frederick I ventured through the dense forests of Bulgaria, diligently seeking suitable roads and provisions for his army. Historians of the Crusades often recount that these wild forests served as a haven for equally wild local inhabitants. With their profound knowledge of the terrain, the local inhabitants would lie in wait, hiding in covert locations, and relentlessly pursue the Crusaders. Leaving Branichevo, they found themselves “in the lengthiest forest of Bulgaria” (in ipsa silva longissima Bulgariae). It was in these very forests that “Greeklings (Greculi), Bulgarians, Serbs and the semi-barbarous Vlachs... lay in ambush, springing forth from their secret liars to wound those who were last into camp... with poisoned arrows” (Ansbertus 1928, p. 28; Eickhoff 1977, p. 59).

The chronicles of the Third Crusade notably distinguish the Serbs for the first time amidst the undifferentiated multitude of people inhabiting the “forests of Bulgaria” (Komatina 2015, pp. 55–83). Prior to this, the only available information about the Serbs had been relayed solely by William of Tyre. Commenting on events in 1168, he calls Serbia a “mountainous country”, “which is thickly wooded and very difficult to access”. According to the chronicler, the inhabitants of the region are referred to as the “servii”, who trace their origins back to exiles banished to this land and “condemned to work in the marble quarries and mines”. From this condition of servitude, they are said to take their name (Guillaume de Tyr 1986, p. 916). In William of Tyre’s perspective, the way of life of the “servii” is entirely shaped by their natural surroundings. The locals are said to lack knowledge of agriculture but instead “rely on possession of “large flocks and herds”.

Eyewitness accounts reveal that during his expedition along the Via Militaris, Frederick I not only encountered the Serbs (seruigii), but also came across the Serbian rulers, Stefan Nemanjić and his brothers (Historia Peregrinorum 1928, pp. 134–55; Eickhoff 1977, p. 61). These Serbian rulers expressed a desire to forge an alliance with the emperor against Byzantium. However, Frederick I refused this proposal (Ansbertus 1928, p. 31), as well as a similar invitation extended by the Bulgarian rulers, the brothers Asen (Ansbertus 1928, p. 33; Tageno 1861, p. 509). The Nemanjić brothers went further by supplying the emperor with provisions. According to Ansbert’s account, they presented him with “splendid and copious amounts of wine, barley, flour, and more”. In an attempt to emphasize the exotic nature of Serbia, among the other gifts there were “six of what they call ‘sea cows’ or seals (boves marini), a tame boar and three live deers, which were equally tame” (Ansbertus 1928, p. 30).

On 30 July 1189, Frederick’s army, accompanied by his Serbian allies, departed from Niš and continued their journey through the inhospitable terrain of “Bulgaria” en route to Stralitsa (Sofia). According to the Crusader chronicles, the warriors had to traverse
steep mountains and deep valleys (abrupta montium et ima vallium) (Historia Peregrinorum 1928, p. 135), while navigating rough and difficult roads (per asperas et duras vias). They faced repeated sieges and attacks from various adversaries, including Greeks and Vlachs (Ansbertus 1928, p. 35).

Judging from the chronicle of Ansbert, these robbers (latrunculi) pursued the army along the main road (strata publica), hiding in dense thickets (condensis veprium latitantes). They “unexpectedly shot poisoned arrows (sagittis toxicatis) at our men as they went along unprotected and unprepared” (Ansbertus 1928, pp. 35, 40; Arnoldus Lubecensis 1868, p. 172). As in medieval literature, the forest depicted in the chronicles of the Crusades is a distinct realm beyond civilization, beyond the reach of law and human governance. It serves as a natural habitat for robbers (latrunculi) and bandits (praedones). The “Bulgarian forest” (silva Bulgarica) functions as a hunting ground where hunters and prey coexist. The Crusader knights assume a role of hunters as they navigate encounters with locals who, according to chroniclers, are portrayed as being scarcely distinguished from wild beasts, actively pursuing and obstructing the Crusaders’ progress.

In this account, the bishop of Passau and the Duke Berthold of Merania found themselves in a “wooded and narrow valley” (nemorosam vallem et angustam) along with the rocky gorges (fauces rupium) (Historia Peregrinorum 1928, p. 136). Their path through the terrain was obstructed by Slavs who had piled up a heap of “chopped down groves” (nemorum excisorum). The Crusaders were compelled to repel attacks of Greeks and Vlachs in a heated battle, in which they slew over 40 people. Additionally, they captured 24 prisoners who were brought back to the camp, bound to the tails of horses. They saw them hanging from one gibbet by the feet, “as wolves are hung” (more lupino) (Ansbertus 1928, p. 35; Historia Peregrinorum 1928, pp. 136–37; Tageno 1861, p. 509). According to one of the chroniclers, the “robbers” who launched poisoned arrows, were executed by “hanging along the road, their bodies left to hang upside down like dirty dogs or predatory wolves” (Historia Peregrinorum 1928, p. 135).

Frederick, the advocate of Berg observed a local resident perched atop a tree, poised to unleash poisoned arrows upon the Crusaders. The “robber” was shot from the tree by an arrow, and then as an appropriate punishment Frederick ordered him to be hanged from the same tree. Furthermore, Federick I Barbarossa proceeded to pass judgement on six other individuals, condemning them to a similar shameful death by hanging. This served as a grim spectacle that instilled fear in the remaining locals (Ansbertus 1928, p. 35; Historia Peregrinorum 1928, p. 134). The chronicles recount instances in which the Crusaders apprehended local inhabitants making use of nets, likening the act to capturing animals (Tageno 1861, p. 509). Those captured at the scene of the crime were subjected to “deserved punishment”—execution by hanging (Ansbertus 1928, p. 40).

The Emperor Frederick I achieved the capturing of numerous semi-barbarians who were obstructing the progress of the Crusaders along the “royal road” (Via regia). Employing nets, they ensnared these locals and hanged them from the entangled branches of trees situated directly in the middle of the road (Otto de Sancto Blasio 1912, p. 46).

We cannot verify the accuracy of the chroniclers’ accounts, nor can we confirm whether poisoned arrows were actually used. However, what is clear is that medieval writers portrayed Slavs as individuals of significantly lower human status, likening their behavior to that of wild animals and effectively dehumanizing them. These local inhabitants were presented as a byproduct of this peculiar and menacing natural environment, which served as a haven from where they could potentially launch attacks on the Crusaders at any given moment (Dall’Aglio 2010, pp. 416–17).

After wandering for 14 days through the hazardous ‘Bulgarian forests,’ where the Crusaders were subjected to attacks by the Slavs and hunted local residents such as animals, Frederick Barbarossa’s knights finally reached Stralitsa. However, to their dismay, they discovered an absence of people and provision, once again experiencing the Byzantines’ treachery in its fullest form (Ansbertus 1928, p. 35). As the knights were unable to find well-trodden roads, they were compelled to traverse rocky gorges and mountain passes,
surmounting natural obstacles in their quest for sustenance. The locals persistently impeded their progress by obstructing passages with stones, fallen tree trunks, and branches within the woods.

As the Crusaders approached the renowned gates of St. Basil (the Trajan Gates), which represented the largest and ultimate passageway in Bulgaria (Historia Peregrinorum 1928, p. 138; Eickhoff 1977, p. 60), they discovered that the roads had been obstructed “with felled trees and huge boulders by order of the emperor” (Ansbertus 1928, p. 36; Historia Peregrinorum 1928, p. 136).

The inhospitable and impassable forests depicted earlier, in which the Crusaders endured deprivation and lost their way, stand in stark contrast with the cultivated fields found in the Maritsa River valley. After crossing the mountain pass, the Crusaders reached these fertile lands. On 24 August 1189, Frederick I’s troops had arrived at the city of Pazardzhik (Cicrvviz). The frightened residents had hastily fled, leaving their harvest untouched. The Crusaders described this area as a “fertile and pleasant plain” (fertilem et amenam) (Historia Peregrinorum 1928, p. 140), “abounding in vineyards and all kinds of blessings”. Here, the weary Crusader army, “quenched their thirst and hunger” “like a weary sheep, thirsting for a source” (Ansbertus 1928, p. 38).

Similarly, the prosperous city of Philippopolis in the Maritsa River valley is portrayed. Chroniclers describe it as “the richest and most well-defended by natural boundaries and engineering art” (Ansbertus 1928, p. 41). Similar to other cities, the Greeks abandoned Philippopolis out of fear of the German knights (Ansbertus 1928, pp. 38–39). However, the Crusaders viewed it as a city destined for them “by God”, since they discovered edible provisions and satisfied their thirst and hunger, “harvesting grapes from the land, pressing them, and extracting fruits from cellars.” (Ansbertus 1928, p. 39).

During this period, the emperors maintained their correspondence, and in a letter to Frederick Barbarossa, Isaac II Angel issued a prohibition against the Crusaders from purchasing provisions within Byzantine cities (Ansbertus 1928, p. 50). Subsequently, the German soldiers, driven by their need for loot and food, shamelessly resorted to looting the nearby cities and fortresses that had been abandoned by their inhabitants. They first ravaged the city of Beroe (now Stara Zagora), then raided the city of Menas (now Enos), and then plundered Arkadiopolis (now Luleburgaz), situated near Adrianople. Upon their return to the camp, having seized a rich loot in the latter city, they saw the sign of the Holy Cross, blood-colored and of great size, flickering weakly in the sky (Ansbertus 1928, pp. 62–63). Interpreting this natural phenomenon as a divine sign in this natural phenomenon, the Crusaders began to sing “Kyrie eleison” and praise the Lord. The Crusaders viewed the celestial phenomenon as a confirmation of the righteousness of their cause. In a relatively short time, the participants of the campaign arrived in Constantinople. According to Ansbert’s calculations, the journey from Sava, which they crossed to enter Greek territory, to Gallipoli, marking the transition from Europe to Asia, spanned 39 weeks (Ansbertus 1928, p. 71).

6. Conclusions

In this way, we tried to understand the interaction between the Crusaders and the Balkan natural environment. For the Western Christians who were exploring it for the first time, this unfamiliar space was still a true terra incognita.

However, medieval writers clearly identify several Balkan regions that differed in their natural conditions. They write about the fogs of Dalmatia, the forests and dark groves of Bulgaria and Serbia (silvae condensae, nemora opaca), and the mountains and gorges of Epirus and Greece (abrupta montium).

Most often, medieval writers view natural phenomena such as mountains, rivers, and forests as obstacles in their path, barriers that need to be overcome in pursuit of their goals. While there was a renewed interest in nature and ancient natural philosophical texts during the 12th century, the period when many of the chronicles we have examined were written, it is unlikely that the chroniclers themselves were gradually awakening to this new attitude.
towards nature. While descriptions of *loca amoeni* indicate that the natural world could occasionally be an object of admiration in the chronicles, it is generally portrayed as a hostile force that humans must contend with.

In fact, in the chronicles of the Crusaders, many of the regions described, including Dalmatia, Serbia, or “Bulgaria”, are often portrayed as border territories. These regions are depicted as isolated and cut off from the outside world and surrounded by various natural features such as rivers, mountains, and forests that contribute to their perception as closed and inaccessible spaces.

Indeed, the texts of the Crusader chronicles often exhibit dichotomies, the most significant of which is the contrast between nature and culture. The Balkans, in particular, are frequently portrayed as a realm of untamed wilderness. Everywhere the Crusaders look, they observe vast expanses of uncultivated landscapes and countryside. It is no coincidence that the prevailing characteristic of Balkan landscapes is the topos of *loca deserta*: images of these “wildernesses”, “deserted places” stand in stark contrast to depictions of the fertile plains in the valleys of the Maritsa and Niš rivers, or the well-known descriptions of the Balkan provinces in ancient times by William of Tyre.

The Crusader chronicles often present a dichotomy between “barbarism” and “civilization” when depicting the Balkan region. The Balkans are portrayed as a remote and untamed land that has remained untouched by civilization. However, it is important to note that this perception of the region as wild and uncultured is not necessarily an accurate reflection of reality but rather a construction shaped by the perspectives and cultural biases of the chroniclers. Wilderness is not a given thing. It takes on meaning by the conceptualization made by the chroniclers viewing “wilderness” through the lens of their own culture. From the perspective of medieval authors, the Balkans are primarily a realm of pristine nature, a land covered with forested mountains where there are scarcely any people.

According to the chroniclers, the land in this area is described as uncultivated, characterized by abandoned fields and dense thickets. These accounts not only highlight the contrast “barbarism” with “civilization,” but also juxtapose the present with the past. It is revealed that following Byzantium’s control over the Balkan region, it gradually became inhabited by Slavs, who were considered barbarian tribes (*barbarae nationes*). Consequently, the former Roman provinces underwent a transformation into a remote and untamed land. Hence, the wildness of the region stems not only from its natural state but also from human influence.

Judging from the chronicles, the concept of the boundary between “wilderness” and “civilization” is primarily represented by the “forests of Bulgaria.” Local inhabitants seek refuge in secret places (*silvarum latibula*) within the forests where they launch surprise attacks on Crusaders by shooting poisoned arrows at them. The forest zone lacks major roads, making it easy for individuals to become disoriented and lose their way in the woods. As a result, participants in the Crusader campaign frequently encounter difficulties and are forced to take indirect routes while navigating through these forests. The chroniclers’ descriptions of treacherous paths further emphasize the untamed nature of the “wild” Balkan region.

In this region, Crusaders found themselves wandering aimlessly through the forest before reaching populated areas where they could receive necessary support. Within the dense forests (*silvae condensae*), a veritable hunt unfolded: the local inhabitants tracked the Christian warriors similar to wild beasts, while the Crusaders captured “barbarians” in nets and hang them upside down on trees treating them as animals. These descriptions of encounters between the Crusaders and the locals not only revive the old-age dichotomy between “barbarism” and “civilization”, between chaos and order, but also between the hunter and his prey.

Once again, we can observe that for chroniclers, nature encompasses not only the familiar natural elements we are acquainted with, such as mountains, forests, rivers, lakes, but also the people who inhabit the regions described in the chronicles. The local inhabitants are perceived as an inherent part of nature, a unique product shaped by the
surrounding natural environment. They serve as a perfect complement to the harsh and wild nature. Furthermore, according to the chroniclers, the natural conditions greatly influence the way of life of the people residing in the region. In line with this perspective, medieval writers interpret the origin and daily routines of local residents. For instance, people such as Serbs or Dalmatian Slavs are depicting as preferring animal husbandry over agriculture, while others, such as the “Greeks”, “Vlachs” and “Bulgars” are characterized as engaging in plunder and looting, as observed during the attacks on the Crusaders in the “Bulgarian forests”.

Based on the available sources, it is challenging to determine the precise impact of nature on the Crusaders during their journey through the Balkans. However, we can ascertain that the participants of the expeditions did take notice of different natural feature elements such as forests, mountains, rivers, and lakes. It is important to note that their descriptions of these phenomena are subjective and influenced by their own perspectives. Medieval writers symbolically interpret their personal or others’ experience of encountering Balkan nature. These impressions are filtered through the lens of their beliefs, cultural background, and, most significantly, their everyday encounters.

As a result, a distinct conceptualization of Balkan nature emerges. Similar to the people who inhabit this remote and border region, who are considered its byproduct, the natural environment is depicted as barbaric, wild, and inhospitable. Consequently, chroniclers present Balkan nature in a manner that accentuates its inherent “otherness”. By highlighting the challenges faced by the warriors during their campaign, chroniclers employ a specific rhetoric in their narration, describing “dense forests” (*silvae condensae*), “steep mountains” (*abrupta montium*), and “wildernesses” (*loca deserta*) as prominent characteristics of the region.

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**Notes**

1. The Turkish name for the mountain range “Balkan,” meaning “mountainous wooded ridge,” was later transferred to the entire Southeastern Europe. It is in this sense that this term is used in this article. As for the political connotations of the concept of the “Balkans”, see: (Todorova 1997).

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