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Panos Sophoulis: BANDITRY IN THE MEDIEVAL BALKANS, 800–1500,
New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture.
Palgrave, 2020, 188 pages.

The book is a monograph on banditry in the medieval Balkans, published in 2020 by the renowned publishing company Palgrave Macmillan as part of the New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture series. Its author is Panos Sophoulis, Associate Professor at the University of Athens teaching history of the peoples of South-eastern Europe, who, following years-long research, presented this work of exceptional importance for historical science.

The book begins with acknowledgments, showing appreciation to all those who contributed to the success of the work. Professor Sophoulis' book is divided into eight sections. In addition to Introductory considerations, which define the subject matter of research, its chronological frame, and the time span, it also refers to the sources used, issues encountered, and an overview of the most important previous researchers of this area and their results. To understand bandits and banditry, the author particularly emphasises that the study *Bandits* by Eric Hobsbawm is a must (1981). In his theory of social and societal robbery, a bandit fights oppression and injustice by the ruling social groups. It is a form of class conflict and class resistance in agrarian and border societies toward the ruling class. Hobsbawm's bandits want to put right the injustice of the rich towards the poor and prevent the exploitation of the weak. Their violence is a form of protest against the social needs' drivers. However, such a model is not applicable to most of the reported banditry acts in the Balkans in the Middle Ages.

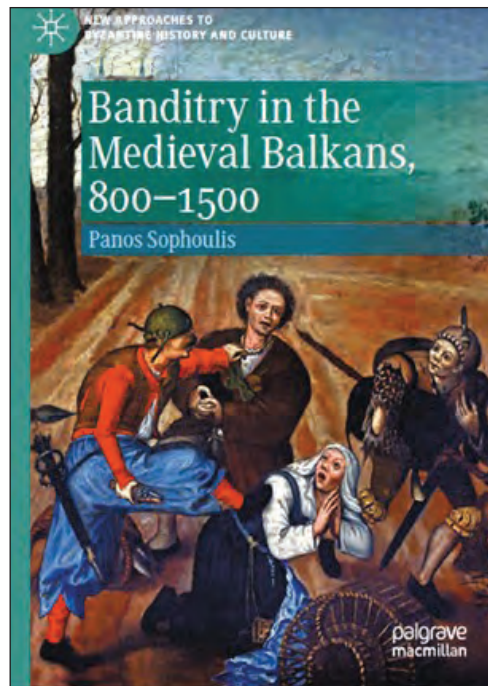
The banditry research was placed in the framework of the Balkan peninsula from the 9th to the 16th century. Faced with the chronologically and thematically inconsistent archival records, Panos Sophoulis embarked on the laborious collection and analysis not only of the plethora of scattered written Byzantine, Bulgarian, Serbian, Dubrovnik, and other sources (Code of Justinian, lives of saints, books of travels, letters, Serbian Emperor Dusan's Code, the Statute of the City of Dubrovnik of 1272, archived documents from the State Archives in Dubrovnik) but also of archaeological and ethnographic literature. In this way, it was possible to follow the natural-geographical characteristics of the bandits - where they lived, the population, political circumstances, the lifestyle of the people, and the dynamics of the bandits in the Balkans from the Middle Ages, until the dawn of the modern times.

Writing on this subject is highly challenging because it depends on the number of sources and the content of the documents collected. The most important sources for the banditry history in the South Adriatic are kept in the Dubrovnik Archives. In research on this subject, the author used only some previously unpublished documents from the series *laments de foris* (*complaints concerning crimes committed outside the city*), one of the rare series recording the minutes of the complaints on crimes and offences. Offences committed in the area of

the Dubrovnik hinterland involving a citizen of Dubrovnik, either as a victim or perpetrator, were recorded in it.

The heroic outlaws' tradition is most evident in England, with Robin Hood as the most important figure, representing the principled resistance to the corrupt authorities. However, the situation in the Balkans is different. Based on the sources, the author verifies the hypothesis that peasants, soldiers, and nobility are connected with the banditry. Most of the bandits came from the ranks of cattle farmers, who played a prominent role in reported banditry incidents in the Balkans. There are several reasons for this: they possessed skills that could easily be put into military use if needed, and because of varying forms of pressure, shepherds often resorted to banditry. Soldiers were trained to use weapons throughout their lives, so naturally, they were perceived as potential bandits. Another reason for the banditry was irregular payments of wages, so resorting to banditry was necessary for survival. In the 14th and 15th centuries, members of local nobility encouraged or were directly involved in acts of violence, including robberies. Following the robbery, they were completely exempted from punishment. The robbers were connected and had a support network that provided information about the victim to be attacked and whose goods were to be taken. The attackers targeted the victim in advance, gathering information and then preparing the ambush. They usually worked in groups, so a group of bandits had between 10 and 15 members. Relatives and/or members of their community often provided bandits with support, shelter, or food, who may have shared some of their profits in return. Bandits were most likely to attack merchants because they were believed to carry valuable goods or money. Apart from merchants, the bandits also targeted other travellers: envoys, messengers, clergy, craftsmen, etc. The author helps us in many ways to get to the bottom of a complex banditry mechanism and fathom, or at least try to understand, how it worked.

The medieval authorities tried to prevent the emergence and spread of banditry by legislation, as it posed a danger to order and peace. Actions were taken through two measures: legislative and field responses to specific banditry phenomena. The author also addresses widespread myths about 'good' bandits in this book. In the eyes of the authorities,



they were considered lawbreakers, while their relatives and other members of the community perceived them as heroes and crafted poems and tales in their honour.

The shortcoming of the monograph is the limited use of sources from the series *Lamenta de foris*, as well as no reference to the charters issued to the City of Dubrovnik by the Byzantine, Serbian and Bosnian rulers. In these charters, the main goal of Dubrovnik merchants was legal regulation of the position of Dubrovnik citizens, primarily to protect their trading business. The charters contain provisions that protect Dubrovnik citizens, guaranteeing their security, inviolability of their property, freedom of movement and trade, and in some cases, compensation for damage.

A particular value of this book is doubtlessly its clear, interesting, and, in some segments, the dynamic language of exposition, capturing the readers' attention, and a story told in such a language seems simple, interesting, and captivating, even though it is an extremely complex issue. Professor Sophoulis' book is a kind of daily history of political, economic, and social circumstances in the Balkans from the 9th to the 16th century. We deem it an extremely valuable study on banditry in the Medieval Balkans, which is enhanced and thematically expanded to an area that was not fully explored by scientific research. We are therefore grateful to the author and publisher for this valuable contribution to a better understanding of the medieval history of the Balkan Peninsula, with a particular focus on banditry.

Marijan Premović