

THE LOMBARD HEADMAN CALLED ILDIGIS AND THE SLAVS

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In his great work Procopius of Caesarea provided some facts about the eventful life of Ildigis, successor to the Langobard throne, who had never actually become king. The Byzantine author mentions also the tribe of Slavs which is very important for their history in the 6th century. Long-lasting discussions among historians have not led to the creation of one standpoint concerning the localization of settlements of the Slavic allies of Ildigis. The growing amount of archeological sources relating to this problem enables archeologists to participate in this discussion also. The article discusses possible interpretations of Procopius' words and different ideas about precise localization of Slavic settlements mentioned by him. Those theories are confronted with available archeological data, especially because modern methods allow precise dating of archeological finds and the increasing volume of archaeological data from Croatia, Slovenia, Romania and other countries, enables the presentation of a new approach to the problem of earliest Slavic settlements.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *Procopius of Caesarea, Ildigis, the Lombards*

Researchers dealing with the history of leadership among the Lombards often mention an episode, described in significant length by Procopius of Caesarea (VII: 35, 13-22). It is worthwhile to devote more attention to this excerpt about the struggle for leadership among the Lombards, as it is one of the earliest written pieces of evidence that mention Slavs. The passage shall be used to discuss attempts to locate the settlements of these tribes that have hitherto been undertaken by researchers. In order to do this, archaeological data and written sources will be examined.

A Lombard king, Tato, was murdered by his nephew and heir Wacho, who, after this deed, had only one rival to the throne, a cousin, Risiulf. Considering those circumstances, Risiulf could not feel safe in the Lombard realm and indeed, before long, a pretext was found to send him into exile. He fled to the lands of the German tribe of the Varni; he must have been known there from some previous visits, as Procopius stated that he "had left two sons there". Soon, however, while still in exile, Risiulf was murdered on Wacho's order. One of his sons died, while the other, Ildigis (also called Ildigisal, Hildigis), the only surviving candidate to the Lombard throne, left the lands of the Varni. It can be assumed that he was not safe there and that he chose to stay away from territories within Wacho's influence.

The family ties presented here on the basis of Procopius's text are not apparent, nor are the reasons according to which Ildigis would have inherited the rights to the Lombard throne. Many researchers have dealt with these problems, for example Georg Hauptfeld,¹ Wilfried Menghin,²

¹ G. HAUPTFELD, 1985.

² W. MENGHIN, 1988.

and Walter Pohl;³ however, these issues are not of crucial importance for this article. More important are the facts concerning Ildigis's life in exile, although they are equally difficult to determine. First, his flight to the Slavs is mentioned only by Procopius; Paul the Deacon (I, 21), who was likewise aware of the story of this Lombard hero, reported only his stay with the tribe of the Gepids, where, according to him, Ildigis had lived until his death. However, the text of Procopius should be treated as more trustworthy, as it contains more details and was written almost contemporary to the events. Therefore, for the purpose of this article, Procopius's note about the stay with the Slavs will be considered reliable.

Attempts have been made for almost two centuries within Central European historiography to locate these Slavic settlements. The fugitive stayed initially with the Varni, most probably in a region near Saale;⁴ therefore it is assumed that in order to travel to the Slavs, he had to go east. In those times, it was the only direction where he could have found Slavic tribes.

Some researchers, among them the Polish scholar Henryk Łowmiański⁵, believed however that he went southeast, to Bohemia or Moravia; thus, the excerpt from Procopius would be the first testimony to the Slavs' presence in those lands. However, such line of thought is misleading; the hypothesis about Ildigis's stay in Slavic lands in Bohemia or Moravia is said to be at the same time proof of the presence of Slavs in those lands. These hypotheses thus support each other, forming a conceptual circle. Additionally, no archaeological sources provide evidence of the presence of Slavs in these territories in the first half of the sixth century.⁶

The thesis about Bohemian and Moravian settlements of Slavs has another weak point, as it ignores further data. Considering the physical and political geography and the dispersion of Slav settlement between the Danube and the Carpathian Mountains and north of them, reconstructed on the basis of archaeological sources, other theses can be proposed. It seems that the Sclaveni that supported the Lombard pretender to the throne could have inhabited the northwestern outskirts of lands occupied in those times by Slavs – territories east and north of the Carpathian Mountains or the territories of the southern part of present-day Romania. In favour of the first hypothesis is the shorter distance between the lands of the Varni and Little Poland and western Ukraine; the latter is supported by the later travels of Ildigis, which led him to Ostrogothic Italy and to Constantinople (551).

Before analysing the problem of settlement in detail, the timing of these events has to be considered. Wacho died around 540, soon after Ildigis's flight. Ildigis's arrival in the Slav lands should be dated to the late 530s.⁷ However, after a few years, in 547 or 548, during the first serious conflict between the Lombards and the Gepids, he renewed his claims to the throne.⁸ When arriving back in the lands of the Gepids, Ildigis was accompanied not only by numerous members of the tribe of Sclaveni, but also by Lombards, which means that he still had support among his tribesmen, despite the fact that around ten years had passed between his flight and return.

³ W. POHL, 2008.

⁴ A place east of Saale, with the names Hwerenofelda or Hwerenaveldo, provides evidence for the presence of Varni on those territories (J. STRZELCZYK 1976, p. 5). At the end of the sixth century, they were defeated by the Franks (Fredegar IV: 15).

⁵ H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, 1964, 312.

⁶ N. PROFANTOVA, 2008; F. CURTA, 2008; N. PROFANTOVA, 2009, fig. 9.

⁷ The chronology can only be estimated, as researchers date the events differently. For example, Ildigis's raid on Italy took place in 548 according to Walter Pohl, in 549 according to Henryk Łowmiański, and in 550 according to Dušan Třeštík.

⁸ W. POHL, 2008.

Such a long stay in Slavic lands had to leave some material evidence; neither Ildigis nor his men could suddenly cut all their ties to the Germanic world or change their culture. During the ten years of exile some of his men must have died and been buried. Others must have conducted trade, trading commodities characteristic for the culture of the Lombards or Gepids. Traces of such events should be visible among the archaeological finds from territories settled in the mid-sixth century by Slavs.

Despite the scepticism about the possibility of making ethnic distinctions on the basis of archaeological finds as expressed by some researchers,⁹ sometimes, with due methodological care, archaeological sources can be interpreted in this way. One example is the result of research conducted during previous years in the upper parts of the Polish area of Roztocze. A large cemetery with numerous grave goods surrounded by several settlement sites was discovered close to the village of Ulów. Finds from those sites, such as silver plated iron buckles and arrow heads (the cross-section of which was flat at the point and triangular at the base) have exact analogies among finds from Moravia, large parts of which were in the times in question (second half of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century) settled by the Lombards. Information about these finds was recently published by Barbara Niezabitowska-Wiśniewska,¹⁰ who also pointed out the discovery within these settlements of remains of rectangular structures. She formed a thesis that these were remains of rectangular buildings constructed on wooden posts. Although this is neither the only possible nor the most plausible interpretation, B. Niezabitowska-Wiśniewska also provides a different, important conclusion by noticing the similarity of features discovered in Ulów and those discovered at the cemetery in Libersee, located on the Elbe River in Saxony. This would indicate contacts between Germans from the Elbe region and settlers from Roztocze. Andrzej Kokowski¹¹ interprets the sites in Ulów as evidence of a short-term stay of a group of Heruli, who, after having been defeated by the Lombards around the year 508, were returning to their homelands in Scandinavia. In my opinion, however, the present state of research does not allow the connection of the sites in Ulów with any one particular group of one German tribe. Still, the results of research in Ulów are a crucial example that shows what the remains of sixth-century non-Slavic settlements on the territories of present-day Poland, hitherto extremely difficult to distinguish, might look like.

A peace treaty signed between the Gepids and Lombards in ca. 548 created anew a dangerous situation for Idilgis, especially after Audoin, the new ruler of the Lombards, requested his extradition. For the second time, Idilgis, accompanied by a group of Lombards and Gepids, sought refuge among friendly Slav tribes. This information contains an indirect but important clue about the location of the tribes' settlements. Travelling twice between the lands of Gepids and Slavs, Idilgis had to avoid routes controlled by Lombards; therefore, a route from the Tisza River to Moravia or Bohemia was excluded. This route would lead close to lands controlled by the Lombards, which in those times stretched south and north of the central course of the Danube. The far-reaching influence of the Lombards is evinced by the fact that Risiulf was murdered, by their order or encouragement, in the lands of the Varni, far to the north of the lands of the Lombards.

⁹ S. BRATHER, 2000; S. BRATHER, 2004; S. BRATHER, 2008.

¹⁰ B. NIEZABITOWSKA-WIŚNIEWSKA, 2007.

¹¹ A. KOKOWSKI, 2005, 530-531.

Ildigis's second stay in Slavic lands was brief and lasted no longer than several months. Soon, he made his way to Italy accompanied by "an army of no less than 6000 men" (Procopius VII, 35), to support the Gothic ruler, Totila/Baduila, in his fights against Justinian. He met Byzantine forces led by Lazaros in the province of *Venetia et Histria* and won a battle against them. However, he did not fulfill his original plan of joining with the Gothic army and, after crossing the Danube, returned to the lands of the Sclaveni. This episode of Ildigis's life evokes several questions. First, who fought in his army? Second, what can be said about its size, and finally, by which route did they march into Italy? The latter question is most important to distinguish the location of the Slavic settlements, but an attempt will be made to answer each question separately.

The opinion that the core of Ildigis's army was formed by Slavs has been set forth in the literature.¹² Przemysław Urbańczyk¹³ writes not about "6000 men", as is stated in the sources, but about 6000 horsemen, and Dušan Třeštík¹⁴ even about 6000 Slavic horsemen. This interpretation seems precipitate, although Florin Curta¹⁵ stated that Procopius used the Greek word *strateuma*, also referring to horsemen. However, the existence of such a strong Slavic army is not supported by any other written or archaeological sources, unless the horsemen were equipped in a Germanic mode and the evidence of their existence are graves considered to be non-Slavic.

However, considering strictly the facts, it should be remembered that Procopius mentioned only that Ildigis had an army. A previous sentence in his *History* provides information about Lombards and Gepids who accompanied him in his exile. It is obvious that they did not remain in the north, but followed their leader. Thus, the army had to consist of Lombards, Gepids and Slavs; however, the exact proportions between specific peoples are unknown. It is possible that the core of the army consisted of Gepids, who were especially interested in a war against the Byzantine Empire, as they were already in conflict with the Empire and the Lombards.

This remark leads us indirectly to the problem of the location of the settlements of the Slav tribes supporting Ildigis; however, let us first discuss the second question – the size of the army. The following paragraphs of Procopius's work note that an army of 3000 Sclaveni raided Thrace and destroyed large parts of the Balkan Peninsula (Procopius VII 38:1-23). The question has to be asked as to whether this tribe would have been able to raise two large armies at the same time, placing the larger of them under the command of Ildigis. Why would Ildigis, having 6000 men under his command, retreat from Veneto? Especially as only a few years later, a smaller Lombardic army of 5500 men (Procopius VIII: 26) played a significant role in the final defeat of the Ostrogoths. So, did Ildigis in fact lead such a large army or is this information false?

The last question concerns the route by which the army reached Veneto. Travelling along the eastern slopes of the Alps, the army would encounter Lombards on lands between the Karavanke Mountains and the Sava River, granted them by Justinian. Travelling along the western slopes of the Alps, they would encounter Franks, who were then controlling large parts of Inner Noricum. The only possible route was thus the southeastern track, used by many armies invading Italy. Ž. Tomičić also supports the thesis that the army used this route, although it is not directly described in sources. The latter route led through lands belonging to the Byzantine Empire, yet considering that Ildigis was soon to defeat the Byzantine forces, he should not have been scared off by the possibility of an earlier battle.

¹² H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, 1964, 310-311, or more recently Ž. TOMIČIĆ, 2000, 279.

¹³ P. URBAŃCZYK, 2000, 130.

¹⁴ D. TŘEŠTÍK, 2001, 18.

We should add another question to all those posed. Why did Ildigis turn back on his march to Italy? Analogous events tell us that such retreats most often resulted from the loss of background support and provisions or the loss of support among the army. We can only assume that this retreat had similar causes.

Another problem of a more general nature is related to the story told by Procopius. This problem was formulated some years ago by P. Urbańczyk, who wrote: "Could the organization skills of Ildigis and his ability to move multi-cultural masses united in a single army be the factor which initiated the Slavic aggression in the mid-sixth century?".¹⁶ There is no simple answer to this question, but the thesis is controversial. He was right to state that the weakening of the Byzantine Empire was profitable for the Gepids, Goths and Lombards, yet the actions of Ildigis and the Slavs were not supported by the Lombards, especially as in those times the Lombards were allied with Emperor Justinian and had been just granted parts of Pannonia and Noricum (Procopius VII: 33). Additionally, Ildigis was in conflict with the Lombard ruler, and hence any common actions were improbable. Still, the actions of Ildigis were advantageous for the Ostrogoths and Gepids.

Returning to the history of the Slavs, one reason for the friendly attitude of the Gepids towards the Slavs – financial – manifested itself several years later. The Gepids helped the Slavs cross the Danube when groups of the latter were returning from one of their raids in the Balkans, but, according to Procopius, they took a toll of one gold coin for each Slav who crossed the river (Procopius VIII: 25).

A second hypothesis can be suggested in opposition to the postulate about Ildigis being the person who caused the Slavs' aggression. The activity of Ildigis was contemporary to a period of successful strikes against the Byzantine Empire conducted by Theodebert, the ruler of Frankish Austrasia. According to Krzysztof Polek,¹⁷ sources written in those times suggest that an element of those attacks was a war between the Gepids and Romans and an attack of the Lombards on Dalmatia and Epirus. The actions of the Slavs could thus be treated as components of a wider plan carried out by enemies of Justinian, the Gepids or the Goths.

Returning to the problem of the location of the Slavic tribes that gave shelter to Ildigis, we should examine archaeological sources from this period – the mid-sixth century. The latest research allows us to identify precisely the locations of Gepid and Lombard settlements, while at the same time excluding the existence of Slav settlement in such areas.

Both Byzantine written sources and archaeological sources indicate what areas were settled by Gepids in the mid-sixth century. These areas included the lands between the central part of the Danube and the Carpathian Mountains, and important territories between the lower courses of the Sava and Danube Rivers,¹⁸ along with Sirmium, which was, depending on the current situation, either a gate leading south into the Byzantine Empire or a base for attacks directed towards the north.

The presence of Lombards south of the central course of the Danube is attested by numerous archaeological finds. Over a dozen cemeteries started to be utilized in the mid-sixth century to the west and south of Lake Neusiedl and they were in use until the Lombards' migration to Italy.¹⁹

¹⁵ F. CURTA, 2008, 662.

¹⁶ P. URBAŃCZYK, 2000, 130.

¹⁷ K. POLEK, 2007, 141.

¹⁸ W. POHL, 1980; M. NAGY, A. B. TÓTH, 1998; I. BÓNA, M. NAGY, 2002; A.B. TÓTH, 2006.

¹⁹ T. VIDA, 2008, 76-78.

These cemeteries, described as belonging to the "Hegykö group", are interpreted variously. Some researchers attribute them to the Lombards, others to local groups of Suebi, Heruli, or Romans.²⁰ The latter interpretation is supported by the grave goods, which include belt buckles with cross motifs, and by the fact that the dead were buried in coffins, which shows similarities to Roman customs. Most cemeteries from the period of the Lombardic presence in Pannonia are located east of the above described area, between Lake Balaton and the Danube River, and are divided into two main groups. The first, in northern Pannonia, consists of ca. 20 cemeteries of the "Szentendre" type; these are large cemeteries with ca. 100 graves, used between AD 510 and ca. 568. The second group is formed from about a dozen smaller cemeteries of the "Vörs-Kajdacs" type, each containing ca. 50 graves and dated to AD 535.-568. W. Menghin²¹ and T. Vida²² have noticed that Lombardic cemeteries are usually located close to older Roman fortifications, which suggests that these structures were reused by the new settlers. Sometimes, cemeteries were located close to old roads, especially important crossroads, and close to, or even within, Roman villas.

Assuming that the settling of new areas did not mean a complete abandonment of previous settlements,²³ the territories occupied by the Lombards in the period of Wacho and Ildigis included the river basin of the lower Morava, areas along the Danube River as far as present-day Budapest, and the lands between the Danube and the Little Hungarian Plain. The territories where Ildigis sought refuge must have been located at a distance of at least a few days' march from the above lands.

Given that Lower Austria and southern Moravia had been settled by Gepids and Lombards until ca. 570, Slavic occupation of this region could have commenced only after this date.²⁴ Two artefacts of Germanic origin found at Slavic sites in western Slovakia may suggest that some regions in the Hungarian Valley, other than those mentioned above, could have been settled by Slavs earlier, while the Germanic tribes were still present; however, these artefacts, a comb from Komatice and a vessel from Nitra (the site of Mikov Dvor)²⁵, are neither the most typical Germanic finds nor have they been precisely dated. Therefore, it is impossible to state whether in any period Slavic tribes would have been neighbours of the Lombards in Pannonia, especially as Germanic finds have been discovered as far to the east as in the river basins of the Prut, Dniester, and Southern Bug, in areas that have never been in the direct vicinity of any Germanic settlement.

Geographical conditions would lead us to locate the settlements of the Slavs where Ildigis sought refuge in the territory of present-day Slovakia. However, two main points provide evidence contrary to this thesis. First, these lands were too close to regions ruled by the Lombards, and second, it is not certain whether present-day Slovakia was occupied by Slavs in the period of Ildigis's exile.²⁶ According to Gabriel Fusek,²⁷ Slavs arrived in the Carpathian Basin only at the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries, in the first phase of the Prague Culture. In the first half of the sixth century, the Slavs occupied lands on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains, in present-day Little Poland and western Ukraine.²⁸ These lands were isolated from the Lombards by the mountain range and could have thus been a safe refuge for Ildigis and his men.

²⁰ I. BONA, 1998, 110-113.

²¹ W. MENGHIN, 1988, 92.

²² T. VIDA, 2008, 76.

²³ P. STADLER, 2003; G. FUSEK, 2008, 648: after 546.

²⁴ G. FUSEK, 2009, 648.

²⁵ G. FUSEK, 2009, 652.

²⁶ M. PARCZEWSKI, 2005, map 1a, 1b.

²⁷ G. FUSEK, 2009, 649-651.

²⁸ M. PARCZEWSKI, 2005; S. CYGAN, 2006, map 1.

Another problem is posed by the differences between the archaeological data and written sources.²⁹ The former indicate the presence of Slavs north of the lower Danube even before 550. Procopius stated that the Slavs occupied a large part of "the other side" of the Danube (Ister); (Procopius VII:14, 30). The interpretation of Jordanes proves to be more difficult. He stated that the Sclaveni occupied lands between *Novietunum*, a lake called *Mursianus* (*civitate Novietunense et laco qui appellatur Mursiano*; V: 30-37), and the Dniester. *Novietunum* is most probably the ancient town of Noviedunum (present-day Isakča) close to the delta of the Danube. This was, for example, the interpretation of H. Łowmiański.³⁰ Lake *Mursianus* was in fact, according to the majority of researchers, the vast marshes at the juncture of the Drava and the Danube; according to H. Łowmiański, the lake or marshes in question might have extended as far as to the juncture of the Tisza and the Danube.³¹ The lake's name was derived from the town of Mursa (present-day Osijek). Other opinions about the location of Lake *Mursianus* were recently summarised by D. Třeštík.³²

However, the interpretation of Jordanes's text poses certain difficulties. Firstly, the terrain at the juncture of the Drava and Danube was occupied by Gepids in the period in question, as other written and archaeological sources prove. Obviously, the Slavs could not have occupied the same lands, but must have settled further east from the Gepidic settlements. This possibility is strengthened by a passage from Procopius of Caesarea (VII: 38, 22), which suggests that the place where Ildigis crossed the Danube was distant from the Slavic settlements to which he was returning. Secondly, according to Jordanes, *Novietunum* and Lake *Mursianus*, which formed the western border of the Slavic settlements, were located close to each other, while the traditional interpretation above identifies them as places very distant (Lake *Mursianus* at the juncture of the Drava and Danube and Noviedunum close to the delta of the Danube). E. Č. Skržinska and D. Třeštík have thus interpreted *Novietunum* as Noviodunum on the Sava River (present-day Drnovo, east of Lubljana). However, this town is located some 250 km west of the Danube,³³ while no sources offer evidence for the presence of Slavic settlements so far west. Thus, it seems that so far all attempts to interpret Jordanes' text have been unsatisfactory.

Moreover, while all the above cited written sources state the presence of Slavs in the lower Danube already in the first half of the sixth century, several Romanian archaeologists claim that the first Slavic finds from these regions can be dated no earlier than the second half of that century.³⁴ Still, certain other researchers³⁵ indicate that at least some sites of early Slavic culture can be dated to the first half of the sixth century. Considering the information provided by written sources and sharing the opinion of U. Fiedler and I. Stanciu, F. Curta³⁶ states that Ildigis must have stayed with Slavs settled along the Danube River, east of the settlements of Gepids. The controversy will only be solved by an exact dating of finds, with the aid of dependable methods, such as dendrochronology or ¹⁴C analysis.³⁷

²⁹ M. PARCZEWSKI, 2005, map 1a and 1b; I. STANCIU, 2005, 567-568; Z. KURNATOWSKA, 2010, 235.

³⁰ H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, 1959; H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, 1964, 257.

³¹ H. ŁOWMIAŃSKI, 1964, 258.

³² D. TŘEŠTÍK, 1997, 25-26.

³³ D. TŘEŠTÍK, 1997, p. 26.

³⁴ I. NESTOR, 1973; D. G. TEODOR, 1978, 34-39, 49-50.

³⁵ U. FIEDLER, 1992, 78-88; I. STANCIU, 2005, 577-578.

³⁶ F. CURTA, 2008, 663.

³⁷ M. DULINICZ, 2007; T. SEKELJ IVANČAN, T. TKALČEC, 2006; M. DULINICZ, 2008.

To conclude the discussion about the location of Slavic settlements at the time of Ildigis's exile, it can be stated that the story of Ildigis cannot be proof of Slavic occupation of Bohemia and Moravia in the first half of the sixth century. Comparing the information provided by archaeological and written sources, the settlements of the Sclaveni should rather be located either to the north of the lower Danube or in the western or southern part of the territories of the Prague culture (Little Poland and western Ukraine). Only precise dating (dendrochronology or ¹⁴C) of the settlements in all these regions can narrow down the possibilities. Additional information about the residence of Lombards in Slavic territories could be acquired through renewed analysis and interpretation of foreign elements in early Slavic culture, especially those that have been hitherto assumed to be proof of contacts between Germanic and Slavic tribes.

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LANGOBARDSKI POGLAVAR ILDIGIS I SLAVENI

SAŽETAK

U svom značajnom djelu Prokopije iz Cezareje spominje i neke činjenice iz zanimljivog života Ildigisa, nasljednika langobardskog trona, koji, međutim, nije nikad postao kraljem. Bizantski autor također spominje i Slavene što je vrlo važno za njihovu povijest u 6. stoljeću. Dugotrajne rasprave među povjesničarima nisu dovele do jedinstvenog zaključka o smještaju naselja Ildigisovih slavenskih saveznika. Sve veći broj arheoloških nalaza koji se mogu povezati s tim problemom omogućuje da u raspravi sudjeluju i arheolozi. U članku se analiziraju moguće interpretacije Prokopijevih navoda i različite ideje o točnom položaju slavenskih naselja koja spominje. Te se teorije razmatraju u svjetlu dostupnih arheoloških podataka, posebice stoga što moderne metode omogućuju precizno datiranje nalaza, a sve veći broj arheoloških podataka iz Hrvatske, Slovenije, Rumunjske i ostalih zemalja omogućuje novi pristup problemu najranijih slavenskih naselja.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *Prokopije iz Cezareje, Ildigis, Langobardi*

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