

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF THE BYZANTINE PERIOD IN THE DUBROVNIK AREA

Irena Radić Rossi

ABSTRACT

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 the main part of the eastern Adriatic area became part of the state of Ostrogoths, which took great care in navigation, exploiting the sea and the functioning of the ports. Emperor Justinianus the Great made the last attempt to reintegrate the Eastern Adriatic to the remains of the Empire. During his period a system of fortifications was built along the coastline and neighbouring islands in order to secure the navigation routes and protect the coastal population. Many ruins of those constructions are still preserved and, together with underwater archaeological evidence, testify to a well organized maritime trading route along the naturally well protected eastern Adriatic coast.

The arrival of Slavic tribes caused immense troubles for the Eastern Roman Empire. During their invasion in 640, the ancient city of Salona, the capital of Roman Dalmatia, was destroyed. Legend says that after the fall of the city of Epidaurum (present Cavtat) in the 7th century AD, its inhabitants established the new settlement called Ragusa i.e. Dubrovnik, destined to become a maritime republic with a considerable naval power. Underwater rescue excavations in the old Dubrovnik harbour, although very limited, provide some interesting archaeological evidence to prove the existence of the early medieval port with the tradition from the Roman period.

The frequent Saracen attacks during the 9th century forced Byzantium to organize the dalmatian cities and islands in *tema Dalmatia*, governed by the *strategos* in Zadar. In the year 867, Byzantium liberated Dubrovnik from a fifteen month long Saracen siege. The main Eastern Adriatic cities and their territories remained under the rule of the Eastern Roman Empire until the fall of Constantinople in 1204.

Several looted shipwreck sites on the islands of Lastovo and Mljet, as well as port remains in Polače Bay, although still not studied in detail, represent a valuable source of information for the Byzantine period in the Dubrovnik area. The archaeological material include mainly amphorae, smaller ceramic vessels, clay lamps, glass recipients and other objects destined to everyday use. Together with evidence on land and quite scarce written sources it can help us to illustrate this lesser known period in the history of the Croatian region of the Adriatic.