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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NOVAE IN CNIVA'S CAMPAIGN (250–251 CE)

Abstract: Almost two decades ago, Professor Jerzy Kolendo published an article based primarily on the account of Jordanes and the contemporary results of archaeological research, addressing the role of Novae during the Gothic invasions of 250 and 251 CE. The present study refers to this important proposal while at the same time reassessing and developing it by approaching the problem from a broader geographical and archaeological perspective and through an analysis of the operational activities of both sides of the conflict. In addition, it takes into account new written sources relating to this campaign, above all the fragments of Dexippus, which were discovered and published after J. Kolendo's article.

Keywords: Lower Danube, Novae, Goths, Lower Moesia, Thracia

Introduction

In[1] the spring of AD 249, Decius was delegated by Emperor Iulius Philippus to the Danubian provinces to suppress internal unrest following the revolt of Pacatianus, and restore security to the Middle and Lower Danube frontier.[2] His mission coincided with a period of mounting instability along the northern borders, where transdanubian groups were already increasing their pressure on the Roman provinces. Within a few months the allegiance of the Danubian army shifted in Decius' favour, leading to his acclamation as emperor in mid-AD 249. By gathering his forces and marching against Philippus, Decius significantly weakened the Roman forces on the Danube. It was precisely this temporary reduction of Roman defensive capabilities that Cniva appears to have deliberately exploited when launching a large-scale invasion of Moesia and Thrace in AD 250,[3] probably in close collaboration with Carpi groups attacking Dacia.[4]

[1] The study presented in this article was funded by the Project Lip3D: Living forever the Past through a 3Digital world. Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL), Cloud Data – AI 05 Cultheritage. Data Space for Cultural Heritage.
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[2] Iord. *Get*. 89–91; Zos. 1.20–22; Mitthof 2020, p. 311.

[3] In earlier periods as well, transdanubian tribes had repeatedly taken advantage of moments of weakened military presence in Lower Moesia and the other provinces along the Danube. Dio *Hist. Rom*. 55, 30, 4; Tac. *Hist*. 1, 79, 1–5; 3, 46, 1–3; SHA *Had*. 5, 2.

[4] Huttner 2008; Mrozewicz 2010.

Against this historical and strategic background, modern scholarship has sought to reconstruct the course, aims, and mechanisms of Cniva's campaign, as well as to reassess the reliability of the written sources and the contribution of archaeological evidence. The following overview of the state of research outlines the main interpretative models proposed to date and the key points of contention that continue to shape the debate.

State of the Art

The first narrative, which dominated historical discourse for decades, was proposed by Andreas Alföldi.[5] According to his reconstruction, an invasion led by Argaithus and Guntericus took place in AD 248. In the following year, Cniva launched a campaign in cooperation with the Carpi attacking Dacia, and crossed the Danube at Oescus. At the same time, a second Gothic force crossed the river and advanced through Lower Moesia towards Philippopolis. Cniva approached Novae, where he was repelled, and then moved with his warriors along the Iatrus River to Nicopolis ad Istrum, where, after dealing with Philip, he was defeated by Decius. Following this victory, the emperor proceeded to Dacia, where he dealt with the Carpi, and subsequently resumed the pursuit of Cniva. Another clash took place later in AD 250 near Beroe; this time Cniva emerged victorious. The Roman forces withdrew to Oescus to prepare for the next stages of the war. The Goths captured Philippopolis with the assistance of Priscus. In AD 251, laden with booty, they set out for home by the shortest route. Decius dispatched Gallus with orders to secure the crossing at the Danube delta, while he himself blocked the western passes leading through the Haemus Mountains.[6] The final confrontation occurred near Abritus in June AD 251, where the Goths achieved an unprecedented victory.

A significant shift in emphasis was introduced by Boris Gerov in an article published in 1963,[7] which relied primarily on numismatic evidence.[8] He proposed a model of two major invasions between AD 248 and 251, and a complex picture of several Gothic contingents spreading across the Balkans. In this interpretation, Cniva's principal expedition began in the spring of AD 250: the Goths crossed the Danube at multiple points, with one force besieging Novae, and another advancing on Philippopolis; a battle took place near Beroe, followed by wintering in the area of Philippopolis and a return march via Abritus. This scheme, strongly grounded in numismatic data, was repeated for decades and became a reference point for further discussion.

Andreas Schwarcz[9] and Herwig Wolfram[10] both reorganised and simplified this narrative. A. Schwarcz accepted the invasion of AD 248, but shifted the narrative focus to a large barbarian coalition that ravaged Moesia and Thrace at the beginning of AD 250, captured Philippopolis, and wintered there. H. Wolfram firmly rejected the historicity of Ostrogotha and, from the entire account of Jordanes, extracted a single decisive offensive by Cniva in the years AD 250–251. In his reconstruction, Cniva's army crossed the Danube at several points, with part of the forces

[5] Alföldi 1939; 1967, pp. 312–341.

[6] Although some ancient authors employed this name to denote this specific mountain range, many others used it in a broader sense, encompassing also the surrounding mountain ranges. See Dan 2015, p. 141.

[7] Gerov 1963; 1997, pp. 130–142.

[8] It should be noted that the method of processing coin finds applied not only by B. Gerov but also by many other contemporary scholars, based on the so-called threat theory, was later widely criticised: see Kent 1988; De Greef 2002; Varbanov 2012, pp. 1–8. The first systematic study employing hoards as historical evidence was Blanchet 1900. For further discussion of the 'threat theory' in archaeological and historical research, see Guest 2015, pp. 101–105. An improved methodological framework for the study of coin hoards was subsequently applied, most notably by Găzdac 2010; 2012; Varbanov 2012; 2021.

[9] Schwarcz 1992, pp. 45–46.

[10] Wolfram 1988, pp. 45–46.

advancing through Dobruja and another through Oescus; Gallus repelled the Goths from Novae, Cniva plundered Nicopolis, captured Philippopolis in cooperation with Priscus, wintered there, and then returned north, concluding the campaign with victory at Abritus. In these publications, Cniva's invasion emerges as the central, clearly defined campaign, while earlier incursions recede somewhat into the background.

A new impulse was provided by the proposals advanced by Dilyana Boteva[11] and Georges Depeyrot,[12] based on a systematic analysis of coin hoards and excavation results. D. Boteva argued for three invasions, numerically consistent with the account of Jordanes, and proposed a radical revision of the chronology by placing Cniva's main campaign in AD 251. G. Depeyrot, by contrast, maintained the significance of the invasion of AD 248, but closely linked Cniva's campaign to the situation around Marcianopolis and Philippopolis, and to the tactical decisions of Decius, who is thought to have allowed a prolonged siege of Philippopolis in order, subsequently, to besiege the besiegers himself. In both interpretations, numismatic data assume increased importance and are more firmly tied to specific stages of Cniva's march.

The studies of scholars such as John Drinkwater,[13] Giannes Touratsoglou,[14] and Jerzy Kolendo[15] incorporated these findings into a broader narrative of the Danubian crisis. In their works, Cniva consistently appears as the leader of a multi-ethnic army that crossed the Danube, divided into columns, captured Philippopolis, wintered there, and returned via Abritus, where Decius and Herennius Etruscus met their deaths. Disputed issues remain, however, including the precise dates of the sieges of Marcianopolis, the locations of the Danube crossings, the chronology of the battles at Nicopolis and Beroe, and the role played by individual usurpers.

In his research, Ulrich Huttner[16] minimises the mythologised vision of a great invasion in AD 248, and instead regards as decisive the coordinated attack by Cniva and the Carpi at the beginning of AD 250, followed by a prolonged sequence of operations, negotiations, and local engagements that ultimately led to the Roman disaster at Abritus. Lukas de Blois,[17] drawing on newly identified fragments of Dexippus, reconstructs a major invasion in the spring of AD 250. Goths led by Cniva and Ostrogotha, together with the Carpi, advanced into Dacia, Moesia, and Thrace: one column unsuccessfully besieged Marcianopolis and then Philippopolis, while the other, after being repelled from Novae, attacked Nicopolis and subsequently also moved towards Philippopolis. Decius defeated the Carpi but, while pursuing Cniva, suffered defeat at Beroe and withdrew to Novae. After the capture of Philippopolis with the assistance of Priscus, the Goths gained a base for raids in Moesia and Thrace, and when they returned laden with booty, the battle of Abritus took place, in which Decius was killed and suspicions of Gallus' betrayal arose.

Several key stages of this campaign, namely the crossing of the Danube and the operations at Nicopolis, Beroe, Philippopolis, and Abritus, do not raise major doubts and are well attested in the written sources, both Greek and Latin. As a result, modern historiography views Cniva's expedition not as a simple raid but as a complex campaign involving several contingents, extended in both time and space. Nevertheless, the state of research remains open, and these events, above all Cniva's campaign, by virtue of their military and economic consequences as well as their symbolic dimension, most notably the death of Emperor Decius, continue to provoke lively debate and offer considerable scope for new interpretations.

Our intention is to present Cniva's invasion with particular emphasis on the significance of archaeological evidence and the military geography of the region, and to attempt a reconstruction

[11] Boteva 2001, pp. 37–44.
[12] Depeyrot 2004, pp. 17–18.
[13] Drinkwater 2005, pp. 37–39.
[14] Touratsoglou 2006, pp. 139–141.
[15] Kolendo 2008, pp. 117–131.
[16] Huttner 2008, pp. 208–211.
[17] de Blois 2019, pp. 68–69.

of the tactical and operational situation of each side at successive stages of the campaign. On this basis, we also propose a refinement of the currently accepted chronology, including new dating for the key phases of the invasion.

Beginning of the Campaign

The beginning of Cniva's campaign is described in chapter 101 of Jordanes' *Getica*. After the death of Ostrogotha, the Goths divided their forces into two groups, one entering Moesia through the region of Dobruja, while Cniva himself, at the head of about seventy thousand men (purely rhetorical), crossed the Danube and advanced on Novae, from where he was said to have been driven off by Trebonianus Gallus.

Doubts concerning the place of Cniva's crossing arise above all from the more recent edition of Jordanes' *Getica* by Francesco Giunta and Antonio Grillone,[18] who proposed the reading *ad Oescium, item Novas conscendit* in contrast to the classical edition of Theodor Mommsen,[19] *ad Eusciam, id est Novas conscendit*. In other words, according to F. Giunta and A. Grillone, Cniva crossed the river at Oescus and then at Novae as well, whereas in Mommsen's edition he crossed at Euscia, that is at Novae. An analysis of this passage and of the strengths and weaknesses of both readings was carried out by J. Kolendo,[20] who opted for the older reading of Mommsen. We share this conclusion, although with certain reservations that will be discussed below.

In this case, archaeology can come to our aid, provided that we remain fully aware of both its strengths and its limitations. There is ample archaeological evidence confirming the massive and numerous barbarian incursions into the Roman Lower Danubian provinces, as attested by ancient written sources.[21] The principal indications consist of stratigraphic analysis documenting destruction events within the archaeological record, particularly layers bearing traces of burning or debris, levelling, and other disturbances. Additional indications come from studies of numismatic material: in this regard, intentional coin deposits, usually made in anticipation of impending danger, are especially significant and can provide *terminus post quem*. Unfortunately, the rather broad chronology of the aforementioned evidence, alongside an inherent element of uncertainty, often leads to interpretations in which, perhaps against their better judgment, many scholars appear overly optimistic or too convinced of their own conclusions.[22] Incorrect or too far-reaching conclusions regarding the attribution of particular archaeological evidence to a specific barbarian raid, often based on logical reasoning rather than on facts, are most often the result of misinterpretations or deficiencies in documentation made during excavations conducted in the previous century. These are largely due to the state of knowledge at the time, the methodological standards then prevailing in archaeological research, or the use of imprecise surveying equipment. Moreover, many of the recorded traces of destruction, although undoubtedly indicating some form of destruction, may equally be attributed to natural disasters, such as earthquakes.

In the case of Novae, archaeological research has yielded evidence that may indicate a Gothic attack, though not directed at the legionary fortress itself. Between the mid-third and the early fourth centuries AD, the fortification system of Novae underwent significant reconstruction

[18] Giunta, Grillone 1991, pp. 45–46.
[19] Mommsen 1882.
[20] Kolendo 2008, pp. 122–124.
[21] For references in the written sources mentioning barbarian attacks on the Lower Danube, see Gandila 2022, pp. 143–144, table 1.
[22] The question of attributing specific strata of the archaeological record to particular barbarian incursions or sieges has been critically examined on the basis of published evidence from several Danubian sites by Vaga-linski 2012.

(phase III), including the thickening of the defensive wall to approximately 3.50 m, the projection of newly designed U-shaped towers beyond the curtain wall, and the expansion of the gates, especially *porta principalis sinistra* [Fig. 1] and *decumana* [Fig. 2].[23] Those changes in the defence

Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the West Gate (*porta principalis sinistra*) of the legionary fortress at Novae. A: phase II^{A} (Trajanic period), B: phase III (AD 250–350) (by A. Wujec and P. Zakrzewski).

Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the South Gate (*porta decumana*) of the legionary fortress at Novae. (Trajanic period), (by J. Kaniszewski).

[23] Zakrzewski 2017; 2020.

system are often attributed to some dramatic event or sequence of events in the late third century that damaged several sections of the defensive line, most notably on the western and northern fronts. Visible reconstruction traces along the defensive wall correspond to thick ash layers dating to the same phase, containing heavily burnt ceramic and stone debris. Evidence of destruction was also identified in several internal structures of the fortress.[24] However, not all damage can be attributed to an alleged hostile siege of Novae, and some of the noted damage to the fortifications may have resulted from natural hazards, particularly earthquakes, which are documented in the region historically and continue to cause significant damage in the Balkans.[25] Another issue concerns the feasibility of launching such an attack against a well-fortified Roman garrison manned by legionaries. It should also be taken into account that the reconstruction of the fortifications could have been prompted by necessary repair works on the defensive structures, which had been in use for over 150 years by the mid-third century AD. In any case, the timeframe for the above events remains fairly broad, and the aforementioned modifications by no means constitute hasty repairs, as they encompassed the entire defensive system. However, traces of much more extensive destruction have been discovered beyond the fortification perimeter, and these can be more confidently associated directly with the hostile actions of Cniva's warriors described in the ancient sources. This includes damage recorded especially in the so-called *villa extra muros* and the *mithraeum*, as well as in the *canabae* surrounding the fortress.[26]

In addition, consideration must also be given to what constituted the principal and distinctive defining feature of this limes: its axis the Danube, or more precisely its lower course, stretching from the Iron Gates across the lowland–upland landscape of southern Romania and northern Bulgaria, before ending in its extensive delta on the coast of the Black Sea. The decision to establish the frontier of the Empire along the river[27] should not be surprising, given that it constituted a formidable natural barrier. In addition, the southern bank, which is mainly formed by the Danubian Plain, is characterised by loess hills with steep escarpments rising above the much lower and more open northern side of the river.[28] The rather hilly topography of the Danubian Plain consists of numerous plateaus intersected by perpendicularly running tributaries of the Danube,[29] which must have hindered the movement of armies along the east–west axis.[30] Another, equally significant function of the Danube was its role as a major artery of communication and transport, facilitating the movement of troops and supplies, between the western provinces, Moesia Inferior, and the wider Black Sea basin.[31] For this reason, the river was subjected to strict control, achieved principally through the strategic placement of garrisons at its bends,[32] as well as by means of the Moesian fleet (*classis Moesica*), which was probably established already under Tiberius, and later significantly expanded by Vespasian (*classis Flavia Moesica*).[33]

Contrary to the above, the Lower Danube did not represent an impassable obstacle. In several sections, conditions existed that facilitated its crossing, most often in places where natural fords

[24] One such case is illustrated by a layer of broken roof tiles, originally forming the roof of a barracks along the *intervallum* near Tower no. 27, later covered by a levelling layer upon which a rectangular structure was subsequently built. The foundation deposit dates its construction to the end of the reign of Probus (AD 282). See Jaworski, Zakrzewski 2020, pp. 369–370.

[25] Shebalin *et alii.* 1998; cf. Sarnowski, Kovalevskaja, Tomas 2010, p. 169, note 66.

[26] Tomas 2017, p. 56; 2016, p. 59; Vladkova 2003; 2010; 2015. Further research on the *Villa extra muros*, currently directed by Marin Marinov, promises to yield new discoveries in this context.

[27] For discussion on the river frontier established by the Romans, see Breeze 2015; Sommer 2009, p. 112; Breeze, Jilek 2008, pp. 65–69; Rankov 2005, pp. 175–176.

[28] Conrad 2006, p. 310.

[29] Embleton 1984, pp. 385–386.

[30] Lemke 2015, p. 845.

[31] Ładomirski 1992, pp. 119–125.

[32] Sommer 2009, pp. 110–111.

[33] Matei-Popescu 2010, pp. 245–249.

or narrowings occurred, or where islands were present.[34] Such river islands, specifically Adda and Bujurescu, not only facilitated the crossing of the Danube in the vicinity of Novae (Svishtov), but also concealed the concentration of the Russian Imperial Army in 1877, thus starting the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878).[35] Later, in 1916, the favourable conditions for crossing at this location were exploited by the German army during World War I (1914–1918).[36] Other locations offering suitable conditions for crossing the Danube included sections of the river near today's towns of Nikopol, Tutrakan, and Silistra, as well as Călăraşi, Hărşova, Galaţi, Isaccea, and Tulcea.[37] All of these sites were defended in Antiquity by Roman garrisons, such as the auxiliary forts at Nicopolis (*ala I Scubulorum*) and Transmarisca (*cohors I Thracum Syriaca*), the legionary fortresses of Novae (*legio I Italica*) and Durostorum (*legio XI Claudia*), as well as the bases of the *classis Flavia Moesica* at Noviodunum and Aegyssus.

Returning to the various editorial emendations of Jordanes' account, we consider that the principal landing place of the barbarian forces was in the vicinity of Novae, as is indicated by the aforementioned archaeologically observable traces of destruction dated to this period and by the conspicuous absence of comparable destruction in other sectors of the limes. A further argument is provided by the relatively favourable conditions for crossing the river at precisely this point, which were successfully exploited by later armies.

Discrepancies in the editorial emendation of Jordanes' testimony may be a consequence of the way in which the operation itself would have been carried out. In the time of Cniva, it was not possible to prepare a landing from the opposite bank in advance by striking the enemy with the kind of devastating long-range weaponry characteristic of modern armies. The crossing of a large number of warriors over a river such as the Danube required time and preparation, which in practice made it impossible to bring significant forces across in a short period of time. Some scholars[38] have suggested that parts of the army may have used Roman ferries or captured vessels, possibly with the help of local collaborators or mercenaries.

As numerous examples of modern military landings show, success requires the establishment of a bridgehead and the prevention of its destruction by the enemy. We therefore consider that the crossing of the Danube by Cniva's group took place at several points, one of which could have been located somewhere to the west of Novae, but not at a location too far away so as not to lose the element of surprise.

The purpose of such a manoeuvre would have been to advance upon Novae, and to enable a safe landing in its vicinity. This would have required coordination and close cooperation between the various barbarian groups in order to ensure success. Paralysing the garrison at Novae by confining the defenders within the fortress would have prevented the Romans from thwarting the landing of the main Gothic forces at a more favourable point: that is precisely in the area of Novae. The idea that the barbarians crossed the river at several points had already been advanced by B. Gerov.[39] It must, however, be noted that by dividing their forces into smaller detachments, the barbarians would have run the risk of their easier interception and destruction by the Romans. Nevertheless, an additional advantage of such a manoeuvre would have been the

[34] The waters of the Lower Danube, spreading widely across this area, frequently formed numerous branches and islands, while its floodplains were transformed into extensive marshes and shallow riverine lakes located directly along the banks. See Ładomirski 1978, p. 57. About the fords on the Danube, see Goda 2010.

[35] Lemke 2008.

[36] Lemke 2011.

[37] Lemke 2015, p. 845.

[38] Cf. Boteva 2001.

[39] Gerov 1963, pp. 134–136. It should nevertheless be noted that he allowed for the possibility that they were not carried out simultaneously.

possibility for the Goths to gather supplies for the later stages of the expedition and, perhaps more importantly, to destroy Roman resources, thereby hampering any rapid counteraction to their subsequent operations.

Another noteworthy passage in Jordanes is the information that the Goths were repulsed in front of Novae by the future emperor Gallus, described as dux, in the phrase *Unde a Gallo duce remotus Cniva Nicopolim accedit*. This passage raises the fundamental question of the location of Gallus at the moment when the Goths approached Novae. J. Kolendo considered it highly probable that he was in Novae at that time, and that he directed the defence from there.[40] A more probable scenario would be that Gallus, alerted by reports of the activity of Cniva's forces, came to the area of operations with his own detachment.

In response, the Goths, after completing the landing and in order to avoid encirclement and an unnecessary battle, turned towards Nicopolis ad Istrum. Novae, as a garrison, was not their principal objective. Its capture and destruction might have yielded a certain tactical and operational advantage, yet it would not have provided the expected wealth of booty or glory. More attractive targets lay to the south, and for this reason a prolonged siege of Novae appears as scarcely rational. In the mid-third century AD, Novae was still a military garrison manned by soldiers. Its gradual transition into a fortified town[41] began only after the dismantling of the eastern curtain wall and the expansion of the fortified area further east by 12 hectares.[42] The so-called annex[43] was most probably intended to provide shelter for the population of the *canabae* in the context of the increasingly dangerous barbarian incursions into the province and the general shift in strategic policy following the evacuation of Dacia around AD 271.[44]

These conclusions are consistent with the results of archaeological research. In the case of Novae this research has provided indications pointing to a Gothic attack, although not directed against the legionary fortress itself. The movement of the Goths towards Nicopolis ad Istrum should therefore be understood as a deliberate manoeuvre aimed at avoiding engagement under the walls of the fortress.

The operations described above most probably took place in the summer of AD 250. This date is suggested by the likely low water level of the Danube after the spring thaw had subsided, which would have greatly facilitated the crossing of a large number of warriors. Further support for such a chronology is provided by the subsequent course of the campaign discussed below.

Nicopolis ad Istrum

The next stage in this campaign, according to Jordanes, was the advance of the Goths against Nicopolis ad Istrum and the intervention of Decius, which compelled Cniva to continue his march across the Haemus into Thrace. This is also reported by Dexippus[45] who, in a fictitious letter of Decius to Priscus, cites the example of Nicopolis, where the population took refuge within the city and did not undertake offensive action against the barbarians, leaving the conduct of the war to the emperor. A similar account is given by Syncellus,[46] who adds that the Goths intercepted

[40] Kolendo 2008, p. 125.

[41] For more on the change of the status of Novae, see Poulter 1994.

[42] Construction of the annex fortifications began in the late third to early fourth century AD. See Różycki 2016, p. 471. A later dating is also suggested by the analysis of the finds from the pottery kiln discovered beneath the new defensive wall. See Klenina 2006, pp. 28–29.

[43] Mrozewicz 2010, p. 280; Poulter 2007, pp. 31–39.

[44] Sarnowski 1988, p. 121, note 161. Cf. Hügel 2003; de Blois 2017, p. 52.

[45] *FGrH* 100 F 26 i 27 = F 23 i 24—Martin 2006 = F 29 i 30 – Mecella 2013.

[46] Georg. Sync. 459 Mosshamer—an account based on the Chronicle of Dexippos, see Adler, Tuffin 2002, pp. LX–LXI.

Moesians fleeing to the city, and that in the battle with the Romans thirty thousand (purely rhetorical) barbarians were killed. Here too the course of events is devoid of detail. The only certainties seem to be that Cniva with his warriors set out from Novae towards Nicopolis ad Istrum,[47] where some form of intervention by Decius took place, after which the barbarians moved off in the direction of the mountains.

Most scholars assume the Goths laid siege to the city,[48] or even that it was taken and plundered.[49] In contrast to Novae, archaeology in this case is powerless, since it provides no, or almost no, data that can be linked to barbarian activity in this period.[50] In this situation it is worth considering two questions. First, whether the barbarians were capable of effectively besieging the city. Second, whether a siege of Nicopolis made sense from an operational point of view.

The scholarly debate concerning the ability of barbarian tribes, particularly the Goths, to capture Roman fortifications dates back to the mid-twentieth century.[51] First of all, it seems appropriate to emphasise—albeit at the risk of stating the obvious—that by the third century AD the Goths were not known as builders of fortifications, nor did they possess any noteworthy tradition of military engineering or urban construction. Their predominantly rural settlement structures and socio-political organisation did not generate the conditions necessary for the development of a specialised architectural or technical corpus comparable to that cultivated within the Roman Empire. In stark contrast to the Roman military, in which fortification building, siegecraft, and the transmission of technical expertise formed an integral part of institutional knowledge and logistical planning, Gothic approaches to warfare relied primarily on mobility, raiding tactics, and the exploitation of favourable circumstances, rather than on systematic investment in siege technology. It is therefore reasonable to assume that any advances the Goths demonstrated in the field of *poliorketica* resulted largely from direct confrontation with Roman defensive systems and siegecraft, rather than from an independent, endogenous Gothic tradition.[52]

It appears that during the siege of Marcianopolis, conducted by the Goths probably during an earlier invasion,[53] the attackers attempted a swift assault rather than a prolonged blockade of the city. In an effort to drive the defenders away from the ramparts, they subjected them to a heavy barrage of arrows, javelins, and stones. Notably, in the case of the latter, the Goths are reported to have hurled them using only their bare hands. This form of barrage, which was presumably intended to enable the infantry to approach the walls, proved unsuccessful. The Goths renewed their assault, but on this occasion advanced towards the city in deep column formations. These, however, presented an easy target for the defenders, who subjected them to intense missile fire, inflicting heavy casualties on the attackers and ultimately forcing them to abandon the siege and

[47] Danov 1976, p. 179 points to the possibility that part of the Goths remained at Novae, continuing the siege, while others marched on to Philippopolis.

[48] Mecella 2013, p. 290; Huttner 2008, p. 210; Martin 2006, p. 17; Depeyrot 2004, p. 11; Poulter 1995, p. 13.

[49] Kolendo 2008, pp. 125–126; Wolfram 1988, p. 45.

[50] Poulter 1995, p. 28 records traces of destruction that affected some buildings outside the walls of Nicopolis ad Istrum, which he associates with the Gothic invasion of AD 250. However, in Poulter *et alli* 1999, p. 17 he argues that it is impossible to determine whether the Goths were responsible for these destructions.

[51] See Nefedkin 2003, Petrikovits 1971, Alföldi 1939.

[52] Kulikowski 2007, pp. 63–70; Wolfram 1988, pp. 49–53, 78–82. Despite this, since the invasion of AD 250–251, the Goths repeatedly showed notable adaptability and growing expertise in siege warfare, exemplified during the Herulian invasions (AD 267–270), when they employed diverse siege engines, including wheeled towers reinforced with iron or fireproof materials. See Zecchini 2020.

[53] This siege is mentioned by Jordanes, who places it in AD 248. It is, however, possible that his account in fact refers to the events of the siege in AD 250. Iord. *Get*. 92; Martin, Grusková 2014b, p. 746, note 44. The only archaeological trace of the siege remains the famous coin hoard, the so-called Reka Devnia Hoard, discovered within a substantial burnt layer. Gerov 1963; 1977; Depeyrot 2004. However, as Mitthof 2020, p. 328, note 75 points out, the contextual information about the hoard, reported by its finders, lacks scientific verification and should therefore be treated with caution.

resume their raid further south. As noted above, a siege was a complex undertaking, requiring an appropriate number of men, equipment, materials, skills, and precise planning.

Given the determined resistance of the defenders, time was also a crucial factor. We argue that the Goths did not decide to besiege Nicopolis ad Istrum because such an operation had little chance of success. The only realistic option for taking the city would have been a surprise assault. The defenders, however, had sufficient time to prepare their defences. If Andrew Poulter is correct in suggesting that the Moesians mentioned by Syncellus[54] were in fact a local militia,[55] their role was probably to assemble supplies and prepare to repel a siege.

The decisive factor that, in our view, argues against a siege of Nicopolis ad Istrum is the unfavourable operational situation of the Goths. Although they managed to carry out a successful crossing, they neither destroyed the garrison of Novae nor captured the fortress itself, and under pressure from Gallus they advanced towards the city, leaving behind Roman troops who could expect further reinforcements. Initiating a siege would therefore have placed them in a highly disadvantageous position and carried a serious risk of encirclement. Novae and Nicopolis ad Istrum are separated by approximately 65 km, a distance that can be covered in two days by a rapid march, though a column burdened with equipment would have moved considerably more slowly. Moreover, the Romans could rapidly transfer additional troops and supplies into the theatre of operations by means of the Danube fleet. Under such circumstances, a prolonged siege would not only have been unlikely to succeed, but would also have been extremely dangerous for the besiegers themselves.

The sources report an intervention by Decius that brought him victory, or at least one he considered worthy of propagandistic exploitation. The emperor assumed the title *Germanicus maximus*,[56] attested only in an inscription from Africa, and struck coins bearing the legend *Victoria Germanica*.[57] A clash occurred at or in the immediate vicinity of Nicopolis ad Istrum,[58] resulting in a tangible tactical and operational success for the Romans. Preventing the destruction of the city and the supplies accumulated there facilitated the reorganisation of Roman forces and the planning of subsequent stages of the campaign. Roman logistics could thereafter rely not only on Novae but also on Nicopolis ad Istrum. The figure of thirty thousand Goths killed, reported by Syncellus, is clearly rhetorical,[59] since losses on such a scale would have caused Cniva's operation to collapse at this stage. It is therefore more reasonable to assume a limited Roman victory that did not eliminate the enemy's operational capabilities.

We suggest that events could have developed in one of two ways, each of which excludes a siege of the city. The first scenario assumes that Decius, upon arriving in the area of operations, immediately pursued Cniva's forces and defeated rearguard units, while the main barbarian force withdrew towards the mountains. The second envisages a manoeuvre on the part of the barbarians, who, by feigning battle, withdrew through the Haemus, drawing the Romans into pursuit and forcing them to extend their formations. The choice thus lies between a hasty and ill-considered action by Decius and a calculated manoeuvre by Cniva. We favour the latter, in view of the subsequent course of the campaign and the fact that operational initiative up to that point had remained with the Goths and their allies. In either scenario, Decius could proclaim victory and be remembered as the saviour of Nicopolis ad Istrum from the Gothic threat.

[54] Georg. Sync. 459.
[55] Poulter 1995, p 13, note 52.
[56] *AE* (1942–1943), 55.
[57] *RIC* IV 3, 43 and 154.
[58] Scardigli 1976, p. 233 holds a similar view, although he also points to the possibility that it was fought in the vicinity of present-day Pleven.
[59] Compared with Jordanes' account (also rhetorical), this would amount to nearly half of his forces.

Beroe/Augusta Traiana

The campaign continued with the battle at Beroe, that is Augusta Traiana, described by Jordanes.[60] Decius pursued Cniva and his warriors through the mountains and, upon reaching the city, ordered a halt to allow the soldiers and their animals to rest. Cniva exploited this by launching an attack, forcing the Romans to retreat back across the mountain range and to withdraw towards Novae, where Gallus was stationed. Syncellus, drawing, as noted above, on the Chronicle of Dexippus, confines his account to the statement that Decius suffered a defeat, without specifying the location of the engagement.

In our view, these events constitute a direct continuation of what had occurred at Nicopolis ad Istrum. Whether after dispersing part of the enemy forces in pursuit or after being lured into a trap, Decius advanced after Cniva through the mountains. He probably pushed forward with part of his army in order to reach Beroe as quickly as possible and establish a base for a counteroffensive. This required waiting for the remaining units and securing the logistical rear, without which further operations would have been impossible. Support from the south could not be expected, as this area already lay within the sphere of barbarian activity.

Maintaining the initiative, the Goths attacked, forcing the Romans to withdraw and, most importantly, preventing Decius from undertaking any major operations until the following campaigning season. We do not know whether the Goths occupied the mountain passes, although such a move would have been logical, further paralysing enemy movements and facilitating reconnaissance of Roman intentions.[61] Such an outcome afforded Cniva time to pursue his subsequent operational objectives without interference.

Echoes of this battle can also be found in the New Dexippus (the so-called *Scythica Vindobenensia*),[62] in the speech delivered by Decius to his soldiers shortly before the clash with Ostrogotha.[63] The emperor sought to encourage his troops rhetorically while at the same time mitigating the impact of earlier defeats. The phrase *τῇ συμβάσῃ ἐν τῷ πεδίῳ κακοπραγίᾳ*[64] probably refers to this engagement. Moreover, the defeat is explained by the alleged treachery of the sentries:[65] *ἐκ προδοσίας τῶν σκοπῶν μᾶλλον ἢ κακίᾳ τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ συνηνέχθη*.

The successful Gothic ambush probably took place in the early autumn of AD 250. Such a date would, on the one hand, have allowed the Goths sufficient time to cross the Danube at the optimal moment, that is in summer, and to traverse the mountains, while giving the Romans time to assemble forces and attempt to intercept Cniva and his warriors. On the other hand, it would exclude the possibility of Decius regrouping adequate forces and intervening again before the onset of winter and the potential snowbound closure of the passes. In this way, the Goths would have secured freedom of action in Thrace and a relative degree of safety from a Roman attack from the north, where Decius and Gallus were operating [Map. 1].

[60] Iord. *Get.* 102.

[61] Mountain passes of the Haemus Mons, owing to their great strategic importance, were secured by small fortlets and watchtowers. Those types of fortifications were extensively developed, and their number increased in the following centuries. See Hristov 2002, pp. 68–141, 150–180. For epigraphic evidence confirming their construction, see Tacheva 2000, pp. 186–187. For such military installations built in the area in Late Antiquity, see Băjenaru 2010.

[62] F. 194^{v} ll. 16–30.

[63] On this battle, see below.

[64] F. 194^{v} ll. 22–23, because of the misfortune that occurred on the plain.

[65] F. 194^{v} ll. 26–28.

Map 1. The gothic invasion of the Lower Danube, AD 250 (by M. Momot and P. Zakrzewski, based on FRE Project maps: http://www.museen-mainlimes.de/content/6-media/pdfs.en.php)

Philippopolis

The next event constitutes one of the two principal climaxes of the campaign. The Goths under the command of Cniva captured Philippopolis. The best-informed source, Dexippus, in the aforementioned fictional letter of Decius to Priscus,[66] advises, indeed urges, the defenders to remain within the city and to refrain from offensive action against the enemy, citing Nicopolis as an example and promising imminent relief.

This is followed, in the account of the 'Old Dexippus', by a description of rather conventional siege operations.[67] It appears that the Goths who arrived at Philippopolis under the command of Cniva initially attempted a direct assault on the city walls, relying on inadequate siege equipment

[66] *FGrH* 100 F 26 i 27 = F 23 i 24—Martin 2006 = F 29 i 30—Mecella 2013.

[67] Most contemporary scholars associate the account of this siege with the activity of Cniva. See Jacoby 1926; Millar 1969, pp. 24–25; Depeyot 2004, pp. 10–15; Bleckmann 1992, pp. 207–208; Paschoud 1991, p. 223; Danov 1979, p. 251; Scardigli 1976, p. 236; Blockley 1972, p. 19.

and ineffective tactics. These efforts proved futile, and the Scythians[68] besieging the city, having lost heart, withdrew. The contrast drawn in this passage, striking though hardly unexpected, between the rather clumsy attempts of the barbarians to take the city and the courage, valour, ingenuity, and self-sacrifice of its defenders is noteworthy. This was probably a deliberate narrative device intended to emphasise the impossibility of capturing the city through regular military operations, to highlight the inventiveness and dedication of the defenders, and to underline the significance of the subsequent act of betrayal.

The continued course of events can be reconstructed on the basis of the *Scythica Vindobonensia*, which describes the siege of an unnamed city. Editors and commentators[69] associate this account with the siege of Philippopolis by Cniva's forces, stressing that the events described correspond most closely to that city. A strong argument in favour of this identification is provided by Dexippus' description of the city's topography, in particular the location of the stadium adjacent to the circuit wall.[70] Moreover, in the 'Old Dexippus' fragment, one topographical detail is especially significant: the governor Priscus gathered the inhabitants in the stadium, and in both accounts mention is made of a road (*dromos*) running alongside it. Furthermore, the siege itself was conducted by Cniva and was protracted in nature, which accords well with Jordanes' account. Finally, in fragment 194^{v} there is a reference to the capture of Philippopolis through ambushes (*enedrai*) after direct assaults (*prosbolai*) had failed.

Accordingly, on the basis of folio 195$^{r\text{-}v}$, the capture of the city after the apparent withdrawal of the Goths may be reconstructed as follows. The Scythians feigned a retreat but remained in the vicinity of the city, inducingits inhabitants into lowering their vigilance, some of whom even began to celebrate. This situation was exploited by an anonymous traitor who,[71] either out of hatred towards one of the officials or in return for a promised reward, informed Cniva of the weakening of the defences and undertook to indicate the most easily accessible section of the wall (which fits well with the aforementioned *enedrai*). Cniva sent five men to verify this information; once it had been confirmed, they gave the signal, and five hundred of the bravest warriors were selected for the assault.[72] When ladders were set against the walls, the noise alerted the defenders nearest the fortifications, and news of the attack quickly spread through the city, prompting Greeks from more distant quarters to rush to its defence. The Scythians who had already gained access to the walls, however, secured the narrow passages leading to the towers and successfully repelled the approaching defenders.

Syncellus[73] limits his account to the statement that, after the Romans had suffered a defeat (most probably at Beroe), Cniva captured Philippopolis and inflicted a harsh fate upon its inhabitants. Jordanes,[74] in turn, merely reports that Cniva took the city after a long siege and then allied himself with Priscus[75] against Decius.

Archaeological investigations unequivocally confirm the destruction; the sacking and destruction of Philippopolis, dated to the mid-third century AD, are very well attested. Although archaeological research at the site, now lying beneath the modern city of Plovdiv, has been largely limited to rescue excavations, the most recent results confirm extensive destruction caused by

[68] After their settlement in the region north of the Black Sea, the Goths came to be frequently identified with the Scythians, a name under which they most often appear in Late Antique historiographical tradition. See Boteva 2020, pp. 195–199.

[69] Grusková, Martin 2015, pp. 45–50; Grusková, Martin 2014b, pp. 747–748.

[70] The description of the stadium located adjacent to the city wall is an important element of Dexippos' narrative. See Martin 2020, pp. 96–97.

[71] Dexippos does not associate it in any way with Priscus. He may have obtained this information from an eyewitness to the events, see Martin, Grusková 2014, p. 742.

[72] It is possible that Cniva himself may have been among them. See Grusková, Martin 2015, pp. 42–43.

[73] Georg. Sync. 459.

[74] Iord. *Get.* 103.

[75] About Priscus and his potential role in the siege, see Mecella 2012, pp. 289–311.

a major conflagration.[76] The event has been dated, among other evidence, on the basis of a coin hoard whose latest issues belong to the reign of Philip the Arab. Moreover, both the state of preservation and the nature of the artefacts and human remains indicate that this event was sudden and devastating in its consequences.

In the subsequent sections, Dexippus outlines the situation of Ostrogotha, who, jealous of Cniva's successes and faced with accusations of incompetence, resolved to perform deeds of comparable magnitude and set out against Decius with a force allegedly numbering fifty thousand warriors. Unfortunately, we possess no information concerning relations among the barbarians during this campaign, nor do we know whether Ostrogotha was in any way subordinate to Cniva. It is likely that all Gothic forces formed a confederation, apparently under the leading role of Cniva. Gunther Martin and Jana Grusková[77] argue that the expression *τοῦ βασιλέως* in Dexippus refers to Cniva as king; however, there is no evidence for the existence of such an institution among the Goths prior to the fourth century AD.[78] It would be highly tempting to identify Ostrogotha as the commander of a second grouping that entered imperial territory somewhere in eastern Moesia, and unsuccessfully besieged Marcianopolis.[79] Nevertheless, we consider it more likely that the two groups cooperated and met at Philippopolis. In this case, the role assigned to Ostrogotha would have been far less prominent, yet essential for sustaining the siege, consisting of the pacification of the surrounding territory, the monitoring of any potential relief forces, and the provision of supplies necessary to maintain the blockade.

The sequence of events outlined above points to a markedly different, almost comfortable operational situation in which the Goths found themselves after crossing the mountains. Decius had been defeated and pushed back towards the Danube, and thus the risk of an intervention that might have broken the siege was postponed. Establishing and maintaining a siege, particularly one that proved to be prolonged, required not only a tight encirclement of the city, but also the continuous supply of provisions for the besieging forces.

After the successful capture of the city, the Goths wintered in Thrace. To do so, they must have dispersed, since concentrating such a large number of people in a single location would inevitably have caused serious supply problems. This probably explains their extensive penetration of Roman territory, which Decius sought to curb by issuing orders to secure the southern routes.[80]

The siege probably began in the autumn of AD 250. We have no information regarding its duration beyond the rather vague indication that it was long. It may therefore be assumed that it lasted several months, but must have concluded before the spring of the following year; otherwise, it would have been interrupted by Decius.[81]

The Second Battle at Beroe

Returning to Ostrogotha, according to Dexippus he learned of the fall of Philippopolis[82] only indirectly, which may imply that at that time he was not in Cniva's immediate company.[83] Motivated by jealousy over Cniva's successes and confronted with accusations of incompetence in military affairs, he resolved to undertake an independent attack against the forces of Decius. One possible

[76] Bozhinova, Varbanov 2024. See also Topalilov 2012, pp. 180–183.
[77] Martin, Grusková 2014, pp. 743, 746.
[78] Burns 1980, p. 6; Van Hoof, Van Nuffelen 2020, p. 62, note 299.
[79] Mitthof 2020, pp. 327–329; de Blois 2019, pp. 68–69.
[80] See below.
[81] See below.
[82] F.194^{r} ll. 17–18.
[83] Grusková, Martin 2014a, p. 39.

scenario is that he unsuccessfully besieged Marcianopolis,[84] and that it was there that Ostrogotha learned of the capture of Philippopolis. Nevertheless, we maintain that both Gothic groups cooperated during the siege of the latter city.

Dexippus reports that, as a result of this situation and the reproaches levelled against him for the lack of military success, Ostrogotha decided to prove his worth as a commander and personally set out at the head of fifty thousand (purely rhetorical) men to attack Decius. Let us attempt to integrate into the existing narrative the battle mentioned by the Greek historian. Unfortunately, his account breaks off at the moment when the emperor delivers a speech exhorting his soldiers to fight.

This episode constitutes an exceptionally important and genuinely new element, supplementing and significantly affecting the previously accepted 'traditional' chronology of events. In order to interpret the course of events correctly, it is therefore necessary to establish when this clash took place. It must have occurred while Decius was still alive, that is, after the Gothic capture of Philippopolis and before the battle of Abritus, with the additional consideration that in the fragment under discussion, Decius already knew of the city's fall. This allows the event to be dated to late AD 250 or early AD 251,[85] although other scholars restrict it exclusively to the year AD 250.[86]

A second crucial question concerns the location of this engagement. According to Dexippus, Decius, plunged into grief (194^{v} l. 1: *λυπηρῶς εἶχε*) because of the fall of the city and his failure to bring assistance (195^{r} l. 30: *βοηθείας τη διαμαρτια*), assembled eighty thousand[87] men and set out to renew the war, reasoning that even if he had not aided the Thracians, he should at least free the captives and prevent their crossing (*διάβασις*), probably of a river[88] (194^{v} ll. 2–7). G. Martin and J. Grusková identify this river as the Danube, and place the battle somewhere between Novae and Abritus.[89] By contrast, Ioan Piso, while refraining from identifying the river more precisely (noting only that it was some mountain river), convincingly identified the location of Decius' encampment (F. 194^{v} l. 9: *προς αμϊcῶ, χωρίω τ(ῆc) βεροΐνηc*) with the region of the Haemus and Beroe.[90] A further proposal has been put forward by Fritz Mitthof, who situates the event north of the Haemus and, through a re-interpretation of the account of Syncellus, suggests the possible ahistoricity of events associated with Nicopolis ad Istrum.[91]

In our view, the aforementioned battle took place in the spring of AD 251 in the vicinity of Beroe. This conclusion is suggested by the situation in which the Goths found themselves. After the ambush near Beroe in AD 250, they had sufficient time to begin the siege of Philippopolis together with a second group of warriors, possibly led by Ostrogotha. One part of the besieging forces was commanded by Cniva, while the other leader was responsible for pacifying the surrounding territory and securing supplies for the besiegers. Dexippus' own description confirms a certain lack of siege expertise among the Goths, and the city ultimately fell only as a result of betrayal. Nevertheless, Cniva emerged triumphant. Ostrogotha, who did not take part directly in the siege, was, according to Dexippus, jealous of Cniva's successes and, being accused of incompetence by his followers, sought a direct confrontation with Decius.

Decius issued orders to secure the territories between Macedonia and Thessaly, and to defend access to Greece.[92] The task of organising the defence measures may have been entrusted to Ptolemaios,[93] possibly the brother of Dexippus.[94] In this way, the emperor effectively confined the

[84] Mitthof 2020, pp. 327–329; de Blois 2019, pp. 68–69.
[85] Martin, Grusková 2014, pp. 745–746.
[86] Piso 2020, p. 345; Mitthof 2020, p. 329.
[87] Another rhetorical number.
[88] F. 194^{v} ll. 2–7; Martin, Grusková 2014, pp. 739, 745–746.
[89] Martin, Grusková 2014, pp. 739, 728–754.
[90] Piso 2020, p. 345. Similarly Martin, Grusková 2014, pp. 739–740, 745–746, notes 28–29, though with caution due to the damaged state of the text.
[91] Mitthof 2020, pp. 327–331.
[92] F. 194^{r}.
[93] On his function and the troops subordinate to him, see Mecella 2020; Piso 2020, pp. 349–351; 2015, p. 208, note 40; Rollinger *et alli* 2018, pp. 429–438.
[94] Stebnicka, *forthcoming*.

barbarians to a defined area, while himself retaining control over the lands north of the mountain range,[95] which in winter were in any case difficult, if not impossible, to cross, especially for Goths burdened with booty.[96]

In the spring of AD 251, Decius launched another counteroffensive, perhaps intending to surprise the Goths, who for logistical reasons, above all to avoid shortages of supplies, had been forced to disperse their forces. At this point, regardless of whether Dexippus' interpretation of Ostrogotha's motivations is correct, a second engagement took place in the vicinity of Beroe. Although we possess no detailed account of the course of this battle, it is highly probable that the Gothic leader was killed and that Decius emerged victorious from the encounter.

According to Jordanes, Decius' son,[97] Herennius Etruscus,[98] was killed by the Goths in a battle that took place before the engagement at Abritus. G. Martin associates this event with the clash involving Ostrogotha.[99] If this is indeed the case, and the emperor's son fell in that battle, it may also have entailed heavy Roman losses, which would help to explain why Decius was once again compelled to withdraw and replenish his forces before attempting to confront the second group led by Cniva. Moreover, Jordanes[100] states that Decius proceeded to Abritus only after the death of his son.

This battle most probably took place after the spring thaw, perhaps in late March or even in early April of AD 251. Such a chronology would have facilitated the efficient movement of large forces through the mountains, and would have allowed sufficient time for both sides to regroup after the engagement and to reach Abritus.

The route taken by Cniva and his warriors on their return remains uncertain [Map 2], and its reconstruction is therefore particularly difficult. Given the deployment of Roman forces, it may be assumed that the Goths, heavily laden with spoils, would not have proceeded directly north through the passes of the Haemus Mountains, even after winter had ended. It is more likely that they followed a course along the southern flank of the mountains, intending to bypass them through their lower and more accessible eastern section, thereby largely retracing, in reverse,[101] the route previously taken by the second Gothic army. In this context, the observation of B. Gerov is especially relevant, as he emphasised the serious difficulties that booty-laden barbarians, driving captives before them, would have faced in attempting to cross the snow-covered heights of the Haemus before April or even May.

Taking into account the size of the Gothic forces and the quantity of plunder, the fastest north–south route would have been the one forming the northern branch of the *Via Militaris*, running from Anchialus to Marcianopolis, where it intersected with the road leading to the fortress of Durostorum.[102] Such a route, however, would have been highly risky in view of the operational capabilities of the Roman fleet and the likely presence of military garrisons in the major cities along the western Black Sea coast, especially for the presumably extended Gothic columns returning home. It is therefore plausible that Cniva opted for a less direct route, situated farther inland.

[95] Depeyrot 2004, p. 18 has put forward a similar idea, though limited exclusively to Philippopolis. In his view, Decius deliberately allowed the Goths to besiege Philippopolis in order, depending on whether they succeeded in capturing the city, either to trap them in a siege himself or to force them into a simultaneous engagement with both the defenders and the reinforcements led by the emperor. This interpretation, however, suffers from a fundamental weakness. Throughout the campaign, the initiative consistently lay with the Goths, while the Romans remained in a reactive position. Decius did not 'allow' Cniva anything; the Goths reached Philippopolis because he had no viable alternative.

[96] In general, in the context of mountain passes across the Haemus, it should be added that in Antiquity the area was densely forested, and the severity of the local climate is today regarded as the greatest in the region compared to other mountain ranges. See Marinov 2014, p. 18.

[97] Iord. *Get.* 103

[98] Jordanes does not mention his name.

[99] Martin 2017, p. 103.

[100] Iord. *Get.* 103.

[101] Perhaps with the participation and assistance of Priscus. See Mecella 2012, p. 310.

[102] For this particular section see Torbatov 2000.

Map 2. The gothic invasion of the Lower Danube, AD 251
(by M. Momot and P. Zakrzewski, based on FRE Project maps:
http://www.museen-mainlimes.de/content/6-media/pdfs.en.php)

Their overriding aim must have been to reach a suitable crossing point on the Danube as quickly and safely as possible; consequently, any acts of plunder along the way were probably kept to a minimum and served primarily to supplement supplies. A commander as experienced as Cniva must also have been well aware of Decius' intention to block his retreat. If our reconstruction of the events of the spring of AD 251 is correct, and if, after defeating Ostrogotha, Decius—having suffered losses—again withdrew northwards, then following the same route as in the previous year would have exposed the Goths to a potential Roman trap. This danger would have been compounded during a mountain crossing, where the Gothic forces would necessarily have been stretched out and thus rendered highly vulnerable to attack. In earlier responses to enemy incursions, the Romans generally avoided becoming embroiled in minor engagements deep within their own territory, preferring instead to confront the invaders during their withdrawal.[103] The Danube and its banks were most likely closely monitored by the *classis Moesica* patrolling the river; thus, the concentration of a large Gothic army preparing for the crossing would not have

[103] Tac. *Hist.* 1, 79.

escaped Roman attention. It therefore seems logical to assume that Cniva would have preferred to engage the forces of Decius on his own terms, at a location of his choosing, and with the full strength of his troops at his disposal.

Abritus

It is equally difficult to reconstruct the Roman manoeuvres after the second battle near Beroe and the route taken by Decius to Abritus, where he met his fate. Nevertheless, it is possible to outline the likely Roman preparations for the subsequent stages of the campaign. To this end, one must consider the whereabouts of the two principal actors: Decius and Gallus.

Certain indications are provided by Zosimus[104] and Zonaras.[105] The former states that Decius ordered Gallus to prevent the Goths from crossing the Danube, while the latter reports that Gallus was to cut off the barbarians, though not directly at the river itself. Both accounts reflect the authors' conviction that the enemy had to be prevented from escaping with their booty to the opposite bank of the Danube, rather than a precise understanding of the actual military situation. At the same time, they serve to emphasise the active role of the emperor, and to prepare the reader for the introduction of the motif of Gallus' betrayal.

After the battle in which Decius defeated the forces of Ostrogotha, he once again withdrew to the northern side of the mountains, where he probably awaited the arrival of Cniva with his troops. In doing so, he had at his disposal two centres that could be used for supply and for the deployment of his army: the undamaged Novae and the preserved Nicopolis ad Istrum. This would have given him a operational advantage, since this time he would have been attacking Gothic columns that were dispersed, additionally burdened with booty, and exhausted by their march through the mountain passes. In such a scenario, Gallus would have remained stationed at Novae, in the rear of the front, where he would have been responsible for maintaining the logistical base and for forwarding reinforcements to the emperor. He may also have served as a security force in the event that the Goths attempted to outmanoeuvre the main Roman army, with the task of slowing their advance or even halting it and attempting to take them in a pincer movement. His additional responsibility may have been to prevent further barbarian groups from crossing the Danube. The plan was sound, but it did not survive contact with the enemy. As described above, Cniva decided to outflank the Romans from the east.

Jordanes[106] relates that Decius, driven by despair after the loss of his son and yearning either for death or for revenge, hurled himself against the enemy. This account provides a certain indication as to the subsequent course of events. Once Decius realised that Cniva had discerned his plan, he moved eastwards in an attempt to intercept his forces. In that case, Gallus probably also advanced in the same direction, along the Danube, supported by the fleet operating on the river.

Cniva, despite the potentially longer route, probably arrived at the battlefield first and made preparations for the engagement there. Although the clash did not take the form of an encounter battle, and it appears that both sides had sufficient time at their disposal, it nevertheless seems that it was the Goths who chose the location. What remains an open question in this context is the chronological relationship between the second battle near Beroe and the Goths' march towards Abritus. Two possibilities present themselves here. Either Dexippus is correct and Ostrogotha, driven by personal motives, advanced independently against Decius, while Cniva and his group

[104] Zos. I 23.
[105] Zon. XII 20.
[106] Iord. *Get.* 103

merely exploited this situation and moved eastwards in an attempt to outmanoeuvre the Romans, or both actions were closely coordinated, with Ostrogotha covering the withdrawal of the second column, laden with booty and driving captives,[107] led by Cniva. Both scenarios are plausible. We are inclined, however, towards the latter, since Cniva had so far consistently retained the operational initiative and had demonstrated excellent planning skills, as well as a solid understanding of Roman military doctrine.

On the basis of the available sources, it is impossible to reconstruct the precise course of the battle of Abritus. It nevertheless appears that Decius and his troops were once again drawn into an ambush,[108] which on this occasion proved fatal for the emperor. The very circumstances of the engagement and its location are also controversial, particularly the alleged betrayal by Gallus. This motif is ahistorical.[109] The notion of Gallus' treachery fits into a broader pattern of betrayals associated with Beroe, Philippopolis, and Abritus. Such explanations serve to justify Roman failures and to downplay the military capabilities of the barbarians.

Usually it is extremely rare to pinpoint the exact location of a battle, and this is also true for the engagements near Nicopolis ad Istrum and Beroe, where no archaeological traces have been documented. The battle near Abritus is a partial exception, because the most probable site has been proposed on the basis of a close reading of the contextual sources, extensive archaeological survey, and the recovery of Roman weaponry.[110] At the same time, the literary tradition that helps to anchor this reconstruction is not uniform. The earliest account, Lactantius,[111] does not mention marshland at all, whereas Ammianus Marcellinus[112] already introduces marshy terrain, and Zosimus[113] and Zonaras[114] fully develop the motif of an ambush in marshes. Something therefore changed in the transmission of the story. One possibility is that later authors added the marshes as an explanatory topos that made a catastrophic defeat easier to justify. Another, more prosaic option is that the description reflects real seasonal conditions, since spring thaws could have flooded a meadow or caused a nearby stream to overflow, creating temporary marshes in the area. Today a small river runs through a shallow depression at the proposed spot, yet it remains difficult to state with full certainty that this is exactly the place that Ammiannus Marcellinus, Zonaras, and Zosimus had in mind. The clash itself probably took place in May AD 251.[115]

Conclusions

An analysis of Jordanes' account, combined with archaeological evidence and the topography of the Lower Danube region, permits the conclusion that Cniva's main crossing took place in the vicinity of Novae rather than at Oescus. The area around Novae offered favourable conditions for a river crossing due to the narrowing of the Danube and the presence of islands, features that were exploited at least twice in the modern period. At the same time, it is precisely in this sector that clear traces of destruction dating to the mid-third century have been recorded, whereas comparable and well-documented destruction is lacking along other sections of the limes.

[107] Bursche, Myzgin 2020.
[108] Maur. *Strat*. IV, 3.
[109] See Gilliam 1956, pp. 305–311.
[110] Radoslavova, Dzanev, Nikolov 2011. A site that could be identified as Forum Thembronium mentioned by Synkellos is located 2 km east of the Roman camp and south of the modern village of Dryanovets.
[111] Lact. *De mort. Pers*. 4.3.
[112] Amm. Marc. 31.5.13.
[113] Zos. I 23, 2.
[114] Zon., XII 20.
[115] Kovács 2015, pp. 305–314 dates it to mid-May at the latest, while Piso 2020, pp. 343–344 dates it to the first half of the month, and Mitthof 2020, pp. 330–331 points to around 15th May.

A number of scholars have argued that the Goths attempted to seize the legionary fortress at Novae during the invasion of AD 250–251.[116] In our view, however, this interpretation remains highly questionable. The documented repairs or, more accurately, the large-scale reconstructions of the fortification system appear to date rather to the closing decades of the third century AD or even the early fourth century. Also, both the historical narratives discussed in this study and the available archaeological evidence clearly suggest that, at the time in question, the Goths lacked the technical expertise and resources necessary to conduct a siege or to inflict substantial structural damage upon a heavily fortified legionary base. Finally, the very rationality of such an undertaking must be seriously questioned, since we can generally assume that the Goths were not so interested in attacking a fortified military garrison.

The events at Nicopolis ad Istrum and Beroe suggest that Goths did not undertake a genuine siege of Nicopolis ad Istrum, as they possessed neither a developed tradition of siege warfare nor the requisite resources, time, and operational base. Their operational situation after withdrawing from Novae would, in the event of a prolonged halt, have exposed them to the risk of encirclement by Roman forces operating from that garrison, supported by the Danubian fleet. Additionally, the above-mentioned fictional letter from Decius to Priscus, as presented by the well-informed Dexippus and meant as advice for the people of Philippopolis, which holds up the defenders of Nicopolis ad Istrum as an example, would hardly make sense if the city had actually fallen. A more plausible scenario is one in which Decius achieved only a limited success in the vicinity of Nicopolis ad Istrum, saving the city and the supplies accumulated there. This facilitated the reorganisation of the Roman defences and provided a propagandistic justification for the assumption of the title *Germanicus Maximus* and the issue of coinage bearing the legend *Victoria Germanica*, but it did not lead to the collapse of Gothic operational capacity.

The subsequent course of the campaign, culminating in Decius' defeat near Beroe, is better explained through deliberate manoeuvres by Cniva, who retained the initiative, lured the Roman forces into a trap, inflicted a serious blow upon them, and thereby prevented the emperor from undertaking broader operations until the following campaigning season. This, in turn, ensured the Goths relative freedom of action in Thrace during the rest of AD 250, and forced the Empire into a reactive rather than proactive stance in the further development of events.

The siege and capture of Philippopolis reveal a fundamental shift in the balance of forces when compared with the earlier events at Novae, Nicopolis ad Istrum, and Beroe. Only after Decius had been pushed back beyond the Haemus did the Goths obtain conditions favourable to prolonged siege operations and to the deep penetration of Thrace. Philippopolis was taken not as a result of an effective, technically advanced assault, but through a combination of a feigned withdrawal, a lapse in the defenders' vigilance, and betrayal by one of its inhabitants. This allowed Cniva to carry out a limited yet precisely targeted attack against a selected section of the walls. At the same time, the role of Ostrogotha and his contingent confirms the long-term planning of the Goths and the strong coordination between the two groups: Cniva's forces assumed the leading role, while the remaining contingents—whether formally subordinated or not—were responsible for securing the rear, pacifying the surrounding territory, and ensuring the supplies necessary to sustain a lengthy siege. The resulting, almost comfortable operational situation enabled the Goths not only to capture and sack Philippopolis, as unequivocally attested by destruction layers dated to the mid-third century, but also to winter in Thrace and to exploit Roman territory on a wide scale, while simultaneously restricting Decius' capacity for intervention until the following campaigning season.

[116] Poulter 2020, p. 374; Varbanov 2012, p. 14; Mrozewicz 2010, p. 279; Kolendo 2008, p. 125.

An analysis of Dexippus' account and that of later authors makes it possible to distinguish a second battle in the region of Beroe as a separate and crucial episode of the campaign of AD 250–251, taking place after the fall of Philippopolis and the Goths' wintering in Thrace. Ostrogotha had undertaken an independent attempt to engage Decius, a move that may be explained in the light of the ancient sources either by personal rivalry or by the necessity of covering the withdrawal of the main column laden with booty and captives. We date this engagement to the spring of AD 251, when Decius, having previously secured access to Greece and confined the barbarians to a limited area, launched another counteroffensive against Gothic forces that had been dispersed for logistical reasons. A Roman victory, probably achieved at the cost of the death of Herennius Etruscus, would explain both the emperor's need to withdraw once more to the north of the mountains and the necessity of replenishing losses before the decisive confrontation with Cniva.

From this perspective, the second battle in the vicinity of Beroe becomes not only an important link in the reconstruction of the course of the campaign, but also a starting point for understanding the manoeuvres of both sides preceding the clash at Abritus. Relying on Novae and the preserved Nicopolis ad Istrum, Decius sought to intercept the Goths returning north at a moment when their columns, stretched out and burdened with booty, were particularly vulnerable to attack, while Gallus most probably remained in the rear as a guarantor of logistical security and a potential element of a pincer manoeuvre. Cniva responded to these intentions by choosing a more circuitous route of withdrawal along the southern slopes of the Haemus and by outflanking the Roman positions from the east, which once again allowed him to impose the conditions of the engagement and to lead the Romans into an ambush in the area of Abritus, culminating in the death of the emperor in May AD 251.

We agree with the fundamental view of D. Boteva[117] that Cniva's campaign must have been relatively short in order to maximise the effects of military action and to hinder an effective Roman response. Unlike the author, however, we do not restrict its course exclusively to the year AD 251. In our interpretation, the Gothic operations were carefully planned and undertaken at an opportune moment, and their primary objective was to break through into Thrace and to strike at Philippopolis. The execution of such an extensive undertaking required both time and favourable operational conditions; consequently, the containment of Roman forces north of the Haemus in the autumn of AD 250 and during the winter of AD 250/251 was of crucial importance.

Taking into account the aims and operational constraints outlined above, we argue that the crossing in the region of Novae took place in the summer of AD 250, perhaps even in its second half. At that time, the crossing was facilitated by relatively low water levels following the spring floods. Such a date, on the one hand, provided the Goths with sufficient time to cross the Danube, advance deep into the provinces, and pass through the mountains into Thrace; on the other hand, it allowed first for the intervention of Gallus and subsequently for that of Decius, who, after stabilising the situation in Dacia, was able to arrive in the theatre of operations and pursue Cniva.

The first battle near Beroe took place already in the autumn of AD 250 and was crucial for the realisation of the main objective of the campaign, since the repulse of Decius back towards Novae prevented any further Roman intervention in the same year, and secured the Goths freedom of action in Thrace. It is difficult to determine precisely the duration of the siege of Philippopolis and the moment of its capture, yet we assume that the operation was relatively prolonged. Even so, the Goths could not begin their withdrawal beyond the Danube before the end of the winter of AD 251. At that point Decius launched a counteroffensive, which we date to the turn of March and April, that is, to the period when conditions once again became favourable for the manoeuvre of large forces; its culmination was the second battle in the area of Beroe. The engagement at Abritus, by contrast, is relatively well dated to May AD 251.

[117] Boteva 2001.

The role of Novae in the course of Cniva's campaign was considerably greater than might be inferred solely from its position as one of many fortresses on the Lower Danube. In the reconstruction proposed above, Novae emerges as a key centre of gravity for operations on both the Roman and the Gothic sides. From the Gothic perspective, it was above all the most probable main landing area in the summer of AD 250. Their primary objective, however, was not the capture of the fortress itself, but rather the neutralisation of its garrison, so that it could not interfere with the landing or with the subsequent advance into the interior of the province.

From the Roman point of view, Novae fulfilled several overlapping functions. It was the permanent base of *legio I Italica* and one of the most important nodes within the defensive system of the Lower Danube, controlling not only river crossings but also the wider communications and logistical hinterland. It was in this sector that the first contact occurred between the barbarians and the intervening Roman forces led by Gallus. In this sense, Novae did not become the objective of a decisive engagement; rather, the strength of its garrison and the presence of the Danubian fleet compelled the invaders to adopt a mode of operations that avoided direct confrontation beneath its walls.

In the subsequent course of the campaign, the importance of Novae increased still further. After the first battle near Beroe in the autumn of AD 250, which ended in Decius' defeat and retreat, the fortress became a natural point of support for the Roman army. It served as the principal supply and organisational base for further operations, including the later counteroffensive in the spring of AD 251. Together with the secured Nicopolis ad Istrum, it formed a logistical hinterland from which Decius could plan the interception of the retreating Goths and their loot-laden columns. In the reconstruction proposed here, Gallus most probably remained at Novae for the greater part of the campaign, being responsible for securing supplies, directing reinforcements to the theatre of operations, and controlling any potential further attempts by the barbarians to cross the river.

In summary, Novae was neither a spectacularly captured stronghold nor the scene of a decisive battle, but rather functioned as a durable and flexible operational base. For the Goths, it constituted a crucial sector of the limes, whose temporary paralysis made possible the landing and the deep penetration of Thrace. For the Romans, it remained the central hub of the Lower Danubian defensive system: a garrison, logistical, and organisational base without which both the initial response to the invasion and the subsequent attempts at a counteroffensive would have been significantly hampered. In this way, Novae emerges as one of the key elements binding together the entire campaign of AD 250–251 at both the tactical and the operational level.

Abbreviations

AE	*L'Année Épigraphique*, Paris.
CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, ed. Th. Mommsen *et alii*, Berlin 1863–.
FGrH	*Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, ed. F. JACOBY, Berlin 1923ff–.

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Dio *Hist. Rom.*	Cassius Dio, 1914–1927. *Historia Romana*, E. CARY (trans.), London.
Maur. *Strat*.	Mauricius, 1984. *Strategikon*, G. T. DENNIS (trans.), Philadelphia.
SHA *Had.*	Scriptores Historiae Augustae, 1921. *Hadrianus,* D. MAGIE (trans.), London.
Tac. *Hist.*	Tacitus, 1931. *The Histories*, C. H. MOORE (trans.), London.

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