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Carolyn S. Snively

**THESSALONIKI VERSUS JUSTINIANA PRIMA:  
A RARE MENTION OF THE CONFLICT, IN THE LIFE  
OF OSIOS DAVID OF THESSALONIKI<sup>1</sup>**

The northern half of the Prefecture of Eastern Illyricum, that is, the Diocese of Dacia, was not so densely urbanized as the southern half. In Late Antiquity the city of Naissus, known for its historical connections with Constantine, was the major city within a rather wide region. Serdica (modern Sofia), the capital of the province of Dacia Mediterranea, lay ca. 150 km to the southeast, Ulpiana ca. 100 km to the southwest

Thus, in the third or fourth decade of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when a new city began to rise at Caričin Grad only ca. 45 km distant, Naissus was undoubtedly affected, for good or ill. Assuming that the new city at Caričin Grad was in fact Justiniana Prima, built to honor the birthplace of the emperor Justinian, we can interpret the 30-40 years of building as lasting more or less until the death of Justinian in 565 AD. Since very little is known about the origin of the people who worked and lived at Caričin Grad, it is possible that a number of the construction workers and other settlers for the new foundation were recruited from the nearest major city, i.e., from Naissus.

Although, to the best of our knowledge, Justiniana Prima did not ever become the capital city of the Prefecture of Eastern Illyricum, the presence of civil and military authorities and the establishment of the new archbishopric point to changes in the previous balance of power within the Diocese of Dacia. Again, Naissus would have felt the effects of the changes—at the very least in the increased number of travelers through Naissus to the nearby seat of power.

There is no doubt that Justinian established a new archbishopric at Justiniana Prima. *Novellae* 11 and 131 of Justinian and letters of Pope Gregory the Great, together with other brief references, demonstrate the presence of a series of archbishops of Justiniana Prima between 535 AD and the early 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of statements in *Novella* 11, specifically that the distance

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the discussion by C. Snively, „Justiniana Prima (Caričin Grad),“ *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, XIX (Bonn 1999) cols. 638-667.

from Pannonia to Thessaloniki in Macedonia Prima was too great and therefore the prefecture must be moved north to Justiniana Prima,<sup>3</sup> scholars have assumed that Justinian was planning to move the seat of the Prefect of Eastern Illyricum to his newly founded city. No evidence, however, has been brought to light that the prefect actually moved from Thessaloniki, while documentary evidence does exist for his presence in Thessaloniki in 536 and 541 as well as later.<sup>4</sup>

*Novella* 11 leaves no doubt about Justinian's enmity toward Thessaloniki or at least toward its archbishop; Justinian described him as a bishop rather than an archbishop and attributed his status solely to the presence of the prefect in the city.<sup>5</sup> Almost certainly Justinian's hostility toward the archbishop of Thessaloniki was connected with the position of the latter as the vicar of the Pope. Eastern Illyricum was part of the eastern empire, but ecclesiastical control over it was exercised, in theory and sometimes in practice, by the Pope through the Vicar of Thessaloniki, until the 8th century.<sup>6</sup>

I do not wish in any way to question this conclusion, i.e., that the seat of the Prefecture of Eastern Illyricum remained in Thessaloniki from the 440s until it effectively disappeared in the chaos of the later 6<sup>th</sup> or early 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> One can imagine that the changing situation in Northern Illyricum during the second quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century—and especially after 535—made a move to the north appear increasingly unwise,<sup>8</sup> and we can speculate that the prefect and his staff

<sup>3</sup> *Novella* 11, paragraphs 2-3: *Cum igitur in praesenti deo auctore ita nostra reipublica aucta est, ut utraque ripa Dunubii iam nostris civitatibus frequentaretur, et tam Viminacium quam Recidiva et Litterata, quae trans Danubium sunt, nostrae iterum ditioni subactae sint, necessarium duximus ipsam gloriosissimam praefecturam, quae in Pannonia fuerat constituta, iuxta Pannoniam in nostra felicissima patria collocare, cum nihil quidem magni distat a Dacia mediterranea secunda Pannonia, multis autem spatiis separatur prima Macedonia a Pannonia secunda.*

*Et quia homines semper bellicis sudoribus inhaerentes non erat utile reipublicae ad primam Macedoniam per tot spatia tantasque difficultates venire, ideo necessarium nobis visum est ipsam praefecturam ad superiores partes trahere, et iuxta eam provinciae constitutae facilius sentiant illius medicinam.*

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Bavant, "Contexte historique," in *Iustiniana Prima - Caričin Grad*, by B. Bavant and V. Ivanišević, Leskovac, 2006, pp. 69, 78.

<sup>5</sup> *Novella* 11, from the end of paragraph 1: *et Thessalonicensis episcopus non sua auctoritate, sed sub umbra praefecturae meruit aliquem praerogativam.*

Twice in the novella, where the rights and privileges of the archbishop of Justiniana Prima are being listed, there is a prohibition against any sharing of honors with the bishop of Thessaloniki: *nulla communione adversus <eis> Thessalonicensi episcopo servanda*, from paragraph 4, and *nulla penitus Thessalonicensi episcopo neque ad hoc communione servanda*, at the end of paragraph 6.

<sup>6</sup> For some of these issues, see R. A. Markus, "Carthage - Prima Justiniana - Ravenna: an Aspect of Justinian's Kirchenpolitik," *Byzantion* 49 (1979) 277-302.

<sup>7</sup> A recent paper suggests that the seat of the prefecture moved about a great deal before the 440s; see Mitko Panov, "Illyricum between east and west: administrative changes at the end of the fourth and the first half of the fifth century," in *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London 2006*. Vol. III. *Abstracts of Communications*, 2006, 33-34.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, F. E. Wozniak, "East Rome, Ravenna and Western Illyricum 454-536 A.D.," *Historia* 30 (1981) 351-382.

would have strongly opposed a move from cosmopolitan Thessaloniki to a new, isolated, and comparatively grim city in the northern hinterland.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, we can imagine that the people and local government of Thessaloniki would have resisted the loss of power and prestige associated with the presence of the prefect in their city.

Nevertheless I do wish to bring to your attention a source that seems to preserve a confused memory about the dislocation of the seat of the prefecture from Thessaloniki to the north. The source cannot be described as a reliable historical one, but is hagiographical. It is the *Life* of Osios David of Thessaloniki; he is referred to in the sources as *osios* rather than *agios*, apparently a distinction without a difference.

Before turning to the *Life*, however, we should first consider an earlier, simpler, and possibly more reliable source for Osios David. John Moschus in chapter 69 of his *Pratum spirituale* described David as a Mesopotamian who lived as a hermit or recluse ca. half a kilometer outside the city wall of Thessaloniki for 70 years. While the walls of the city were being guarded at night against barbarian attack, one night the soldiers on the part of the wall nearest to David's cell or hut observed flames coming out of the windows of the cell and assumed that the barbarians had set it on fire. The next morning the soldiers went out and were amazed to find the old man unharmed and the cell intact. This miraculous occurrence was repeated over a long period of time and many people stayed awake to observe it from the wall, until it ended with the death of David.

The dates in John Moschus' account suggest that Osios David lived during the last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the first three or four decades of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, give or take some years. Moschus' source was the venerable abbot Palladios, who was a native of Thessaloniki and who as a young man had been so impressed by David that he became a monk. John Moschus died in the second decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, so that his brief account was written less than a century after the death of David.

In 1887 a *Life* of Osios David was published by Valentin Rose, from a 12<sup>th</sup> century, Greek manuscript in Berlin.<sup>10</sup> The anonymous author of the *Life* described himself as a monk in the monastery in which Osios David had lived and he stated that he was writing ca. 180 years after the events described, i.e., in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. Internal evidence suggests, however, that the *Life* is more

<sup>9</sup> Originally I also described the city as "small," but Vujadin Ivanišević, co-director of the present project at Caričin Grad, indicated in a personal communication at Niš in June 2006 that the city had included a much larger area than the central part enclosed within the known fortification walls.

<sup>10</sup> *Leben des heiligen David von Thessaloniki griechisch nach der einzigen bisher aufgefundenen handschrift*, edited by Valentin Rose, Berlin, A Asher & Co., 1887. See also A. Vasiliev, "Life of David of Thessalonica," *Traditio* 4 (1946) 115-147; and R. J. Loenertz, "Saint David de Thessalonique," *Revue des études byzantines* 9 (1953) 205-223. The *Life* has recently been included in several accounts of early monasticism in Macedonia; unfortunately it has sometimes been accepted at face value and without application of historical standards. E.g., see G. Harizanis, "Οι απαρχές του μοναχισμού στη Θεσσαλονίκη. Θεσσαλονίκεις μάρτυρες και μοναστικά καθιδρύματα που εμφανίσθηκαν στην πόλη, ως την έναρξη της Εικονομαχίας," *Makedonika* 34 (2003-04) 35-64, especially 50-58.

likely to be a product of the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century, when monasticism was being introduced or reintroduced to Macedonia and Greece. Furthermore, the lack of historical knowledge about Justinian and Thessaloniki displayed by the author of the *Life* also points to a later date.

According to the *Life*, Osios David became a monk in the Monastery of Theodoros and Merkurios, or the Monastery of the Koukoulleotoi, in the northern part of the city of Thessaloniki, near the Gate of the Aproitoi. There he spent three years living in an almond tree, as a *dendrite*, and then passed many years walled up in a cell within the monastery; during that time he performed numerous miracles of healing, of which two are described in detail. There is no mention of an abbot or other responsible official of the monastery during David's lifetime; although never stated, the assumption seems to be that David himself served as the head of the community.<sup>11</sup>

The culminating event in the life of Osios David occurred when Archbishop Aristides of Thessaloniki, acting in response to a request from the Prefect of Eastern Illyricum, persuaded David to travel by ship to Constantinople in order to persuade the emperor Justinian to move the seat of the prefecture back to Thessaloniki from Sirmium, because of barbarian threats.

Sirmium! Obviously the anonymous monastic author was confused, because the seat of the prefecture had been moved to Thessaloniki from Sirmium nearly a century earlier, in the 440s, as a consequence of attacks by the Huns. With the exception of a very brief period around 535, Sirmium was held by Gepids and Ostrogoths until the reign of Justin II.

A brief summary of the remaining events in the *Life* of Osios David will allow us to return to the issues it raises. David went to Constantinople where he was warmly received by the empress Theodora in the temporary absence of the emperor. During his audience with Justinian, he impressed the emperor by miraculously holding burning coals in his hands without being burned; he was warmly embraced by Justinian and quickly received the documents he wanted concerning the prefecture. No logical arguments seem to have been presented; all was accomplished because of the holiness of David. No mention was made that the northern location of the prefect of Eastern Illyricum might be of personal importance to Justinian, e.g., located at his birthplace, and there is no trace of the enmity toward Thessaloniki—or at least towards its archbishop—so evident in *Novella* 11.

The holy man returned in his ship toward Thessaloniki but, as he had prophesied before his journey, when the ship reached the point from which his monastery within the city was plainly visible, Osios David died. Heavenly singing was heard, there was the odor of incense, etc. After archbishop Aristides learned of his death, the holy man was buried with honor within his monastery within the city of Thessaloniki.

And the seat of the prefecture was moved from Sirmium to Thessaloniki.

καὶ λοιπὸν ἡ ἐπαρχότης μετέβηεν ἀπὸ τοῦ Σιρμείου ἐν ταύτῃ  
τῇ τῶν Θεσσαλονικέων πόλει.

**Paragraph 20, opening sentence (Rose, p. 14, lines 3-4)**

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 14 below.

It is difficult to know what to conclude about this Life of Osios David. Should it be considered almost entirely a work of fiction, a successor to the classical novel?

First of all, in no way does the Life represent the situation in Thessaloniki in the second quarter of the 6th century. For whatever reason, monasticism developed more slowly in the Prefecture of Eastern Illyricum than elsewhere. In the 6th century the ascetic life was probably represented by small informal groups and solitary hermits, e.g., Osios David as described by John Moschus. The few communities possibly to be identified as monastic by their architecture were located in rural rather than urban environments.<sup>12</sup>

The Roman ban on intramural burial seems to have been respected in Thessaloniki, for the most part, until the late 6th or early 7th century.<sup>13</sup> The first burials inside the city were probably made just inside the fortification walls; they may reflect siege situations during which it was impossible or ill-advised to venture outside the city to the extramural cemeteries. The idea that in the 530s Osios David would have been buried in his monastery within the city, with the approval and participation of the archbishop, as though this were a normal practice, is clearly an anachronism. Intramural burial and burial within monasteries was a custom of organized monastic communities and of later centuries.

Ignorance of the historical situation in the 6th century does not necessarily point to a late date for composition of the Life. Historical exactitude was probably not the most important matter on the minds of 8th century Thessalonians. Nevertheless one would expect the oral religious tradition supposedly followed by the author to retain memories of the blow to the prestige of the leading cleric of Thessaloniki caused by the short-lived northern archbishopric established at Justinian's birthplace and of the enmity of the emperor toward the papal vicar. Osios David's accomplishment would have appeared even more impressive in the face of such obstacles.

As far as the early 8th century authorship of the Life is concerned, it would not be inappropriate to ask whether organized monastic communities existed at all in Thessaloniki in the 8th century. Monasticism in a relatively developed form was reintroduced to Macedonia from Constantinople during the 9th and 10th centuries. The Life reflects monastic practices of the time of its composition. The newly established monasteries wished to provide themselves with a longer history and to associate themselves with known and venerated figures from earlier centuries. Hence what we might describe as the creation of a Life of a 6th century holy man. In addition to the anachronisms mentioned above, by the 9th or 10th century would-be hermits were discouraged from leaving the monastery to live in the wilderness but were encouraged to become

<sup>12</sup> Svetlana Popovic, 1998. "Prolegomena to Early Monasticism in the Balkans as Documented in Architecture," *Starinar* 49: 131-144; C. Snively, "Invisible in the Community? The Evidence for Early Women's Monasticism in the Balkan Peninsula," in *Shaping Community: The Art and Archaeology of Monasticism*, BAR (Oxford 2001) 57-66.

<sup>13</sup> C. Snively, "Intramural Burial in the Cities of the Late Antique Diocese of Macedonia," *Acta XIII Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae, Split - Porec, 1994 II* (Rome and Split, 1998) 491-498; Euterpi Marki, *Η νεκρόπολη της Θεσσαλονίκης στους θστερορομαϊκούς και παλαιοχριστιανικούς χρόνους* (doctoral dissertation), Thessaloniki, 2000.

hermits within the monastery, as is the case with Osios David in the Life.<sup>14</sup> The great respect shown by the emperor and empress to the holy man and the casual interaction of monastics with rulers were—if not more typical—at least more desirable in the 10th century in the aftermath of the iconoclastic controversy. Thus, as stated earlier, the internal evidence strongly points to a 9th or 10th century date for the composition of the Life. Such a late date, along with the anachronisms and inaccuracies noted above, raises serious doubts about the historicity of any part of the Life.

Nevertheless, this 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century document preserves the memory not just of a threat that the seat of the prefecture would be transferred from Thessaloniki to the north, but of an actual transfer. Only the journey of David to Constantinople and the impact of his holiness on the emperor brought the prefect back to Thessaloniki. Obviously, in the 530s, the city to which the prefect would have been moved was not Sirmium but Justinian's new city of Justiniana Prima. Ironically this memory survived in order to be included in a hagiographical account written two or three centuries after the abandonment of the city of Justiniana Prima and the effective disappearance of the Prefecture of Eastern Illyricum.

#### Appendix.

χρόνων ὄν πλείστων διελθόντων καὶ ὄντος αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ ἀγίᾳ αὐτοῦ κέλλῃ καὶ τῶν ἀθέων βαρβάρων παραγενομένων, τότε δὴ τότε ὁ τὴν ἐπαρχότητα διέπων τοῦ Ἰλλυρικοῦ στέλλεται πρὸς τὸν ἀγιώτατον Ἀριστείδην. . .  
καὶ στέλλει τριβούνους ὁ προλεχθεὶς ἐπαρχος πρὸς τὸν ἀγιώτατον ἀρχιεπίσκοπον, ὅπως ἀναγάγῃ τῷ θειοτάτῳ βασιλεῖ, Ἰουστινιανῷ, τὰ περὶ τῶν ἀθέων βαρβάρων, ὅπως μεταστήσῃ τὴν ἐπαρχότητα ἐκ τοῦ Σιρμείου εἰς τὴν τῶν Θεσσαλονικέων πόλιν. ἐν γὰρ τοῖς καιροῖς ἐκεῖνοις ἡ ἐπαρχότης καὶ ὁ στρατὸς ἐν τῷ Σιρμείῳ ἐπραττεν, βικάριον δὲ ἦν μόνον ἔχων ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ τῶν Θεσσαλονικέων πόλει. τότε οὖν ἀναγνοὺς ὁ ἀγιώτατος Ἀριστείδης ὁ ἀρχιεπίσκοπος τὰς τοῦ ἐπάρχου ἐπιστολάς, παρόντος τοῦ θεοφιλοῦς κλήρου καὶ πάσης τῆς τάξεως, καὶ ὁποίας περιστάσεις ἔχει τὸ Σιρμεῖον καὶ ὅτι μέλλει ὁ Ἀβάρης καὶ τὸν Δανούβιον περᾶν, εἶπεν ὁ ἀγιώτατος ἀρχιεπίσκοπος, “πατέρες καὶ ἀδελφοὶ καὶ τέκνα, τί ὑμῖν δοκεῖ περὶ τούτων ἀπάντων; σκέψασθε τίνα ἀποστεῖλαι ὀφείλομεν πρὸς τὸν δεσπότην τῆς οἰκουμένης, ὅπως δασιλῶς καὶ εὐσεβῶς αἰτήσῃ περὶ τῶν μηνυθέντων ἡμῖν.”

Paragraph 13, first half (Rose, p. 9, lines 6-23)

<sup>14</sup> See the article by A. Kazhdan, “Hermitic, Cenobitic, and Secular Ideals in Byzantine Hagiography of the Ninth Centuries,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30,4 (1985) 473-487, for a discussion about changes in attitudes toward monasticism and in hagiographical writing in the 9<sup>th</sup> and later centuries. Note the idea of the hermit running the monastery from his hermitage (p. 476), the concept of asceticism within the monastic community rather than out in the wilderness (p. 477), and the example of Luke the Younger/Steiriotēs being “settled in a private tent” within the jurisdiction of the monastery (p. 480).



Каролин С. Снајвли

СОЛУН ПРОТИВ ЈУСТИНИЈАНЕ ПРИМЕ: РЕДАК ПОМЕН СУКОБА,  
У ЖИТИЈУ СВЕТОГ ДАВИДА СОЛУНСКОГ

Веома су ретки извори у којима се помињу Јустинијана Прима и активности цара Јустинијана I на преуређењу црквене хијерархије на Балкану и на вероватно намераваној реорганизацији световне хијерархије. Међу њима су главни *Новела XI* из 535. године, *Новела CXXXI,3* из 545. године, Прокопијев опис града (*De aedificiis IV, 1, 17-27*), као и неколико записа о епископима Јустинијане Приме, углавном из преписке папе Григорија Великог (590-604. г.н.е.).

Стога је изненађујуће откриће да животопис светог човека из Солуна из VI века обухвата и извештај о његовом путовању - учињеном на захтев солунског архиепископа Аристида - у Константинопољ са задатком да убеди цара Јустинијана да седиште префектуре Источног Илирикума премести из Сирмијума назад у Солун. *Житије* светог Давида објављено је 1887. године (V. Rose, *Leben des heiligen David von Thessalonike*, Berlin). Иако је анонимни аутор тврдио да описује догађаје који су се десили око 180 година пре његовог писања, подаци из самог текста указују да *Житије* можда датира из IX века. У тексту се јављају очигледне историјске грешке и озбиљна конфузија око догађаја из VI века; мада је префектура била базирана у Сирмијуму све до премештања у Солун 440-тих година, једини ривал Солуну у VI веку могла је да буде Јустинијана Прима. Без обзира на то, *Житије* чува ретко сећање, а садржи и можда једини познати податак, у вези са заиста учињеним или намераваним измештањем седишта префектуре из Солуна око 535. године н.е.

