

**SLAVS IN THE POLITICAL SITUATION OF EARLY EUROPEAN MEDIEVAL
PERIOD**

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Annotation

The article examines the political role, integration, and representation of Slavic communities in the early European Middle Ages, roughly from the sixth to the eleventh century. On the one hand, it reconstructs the factual political structures in which Slavic-speaking groups participated: migration and settlement in the Balkans and Central Europe, formation of tribal unions and early states, relations with empires such as Byzantium, the Frankish realm, the Avar and Bulgar khaganates, and the emergence of polities like Great Moravia, early Rus', and the Elbe Serb principalities. On the other hand, it analyzes how Slavs were perceived and instrumentalized in Byzantine, Latin, and Arabic sources, from notions of "democracy" and "barbarian raiders" to their depiction as allies, tributaries, and frontier populations. Special attention is paid to the interplay between external imperial strategies and internal processes of social stratification, militarization, trade (including slave trade), and urban development that underpinned Slavic political agency. The article argues that early medieval Slavs were not a politically "primitive" background to imperial expansion, but diverse actors whose military power, control of trade routes, and capacity for coalition formation were crucial to the political configuration of early medieval Europe.

Keywords

Early Middle Ages; Slavs; Byzantium; Frankish Empire; Avar Khaganate; Danube Bulgaria; Rus' empire; tribal unions; frontier; slavery; trade routes; political consolidation.

Any political history of early medieval Europe that marginalizes the Slavs misrepresents the geography of power between the sixth and eleventh centuries. From their first clear appearance in sixth-century Byzantine narratives to their incorporation into Latin universal chronicles and Arabic geographical accounts, Slavic-speaking groups entered the historical record at precisely the moment when the post-Roman world was being re-ordered. The breakdown of late Roman frontiers, the collapse of the Hunnic empire, the rise of the Avar and later Bulgar powers in the Carpathian and Balkan zones, and the eastward expansion of the Frankish kingdom created a wide arc of contested zones from the Lower Danube to the Elbe and beyond in which Slavic communities were both subjects and agents of political transformation. At the same time, the very category "Slavs" was never a neutral ethnographic label. Byzantine, Latin, and Arabic observers, and later medieval Slavic authors themselves, used the term to organize a fluid set of groups and to pursue their own political arguments, from imperial propaganda to the legitimation of new Christian polities. Modern historiography, from the classic synthetic visions of Francis Dvornik to recent critical studies by Eduard Mühle, Florin Curta, P. M. Barford, and Susana Torres Prieto, has emphasized both the need to reconstruct social and political structures and the importance of deconstructing the discursive "invention" of the Slavs as a historical subject. Against this background, the present study focuses on how Slavic communities figured within the political situation of the early European Middle Ages: as frontier settlers, raiders, tributaries, allies, and eventually rulers; as objects of

imperial border policy and as creators of their own centers of power. It treats the “early medieval political situation” not as a static map of states, but as a shifting system of military coalitions, tribute networks, trade routes, and ideological constructions, in which Slavs participated in differentiated ways across regions and centuries.

The entry of Slavic-speaking groups into the political field of early medieval Europe is inseparable from the large-scale demographic and military processes usually subsumed under the “Great Migration” and its aftermath. Archaeological and written evidence indicate that by the late fifth and early sixth centuries, populations that later linguistic and historical scholarship identifies as Slavs had begun to appear north of the Lower Danube frontier and to press into the Balkans, taking advantage of the weakening of Roman defensive structures after the fall of the Hunnic confederation. Wolfgang Fritze stresses that while traditional narratives have often over-emphasized external catalysts such as the Avars, internal dynamics—population growth, competition for resources, and the development of warrior elites—must also be taken into account as drivers of a long-term Slavic expansion toward the Balkans and into Central Europe. At the same time, the establishment of the Avar khaganate in the Carpathian basin in the late sixth century created a powerful nomadic polity whose raids against Byzantium and the Frankish realm repeatedly intersected with the movement and settlement of Slavic groups. Early Byzantine sources report Slavic raiders crossing the Danube, attacking the Balkans, and even participating in the great siege of Constantinople in, a campaign in which Avar command and Slavic manpower were combined. Yet as Fritze and later studies underline, relations between Avars and Slavs were highly differentiated; in some regions Slavic groups appear as subordinates, in others as allies with their own interests, conducting independent sieges such as that of Thessaloniki around or advancing into the Drava valley at the end of the sixth century. The Danube frontier, maintained with difficulty by Byzantium into the early seventh century, thus became less a hard border and more a zone of fluctuating control in which Slavic military initiatives shaped the empire’s strategic posture.

The political significance of this Slavic presence is evident in the way Byzantine authors conceptualized the new groups. Procopius’ famous description of the Sclavenes and Antes as peoples “not ruled by one man” but living under a form of “democracy” has long underpinned the stereotype of early Slavs as politically primitive, lacking in centralized kingship and therefore condemned to be ruled or bypassed by more organized neighbors. Florin Curta’s analysis of early Slavic power, however, argues that such passages must be read within a Byzantine rhetorical context and do not preclude the existence of strong leaders and complex political structures; the very success of Slavic coalitions in conducting long-range raids, sieges, and settlements implies some capacity for leadership and collective decision-making beyond small kin groups. Archaeological evidence from sixth- and seventh-century sites north of the Danube, including fortified settlements and elite burials, combined with the appearance in written sources of names of Slavic leaders and tribal unions, supports the view that early Slavic societies possessed flexible but effective patterns of authority, even if they did not initially crystallize into monarchies on the Roman or Germanic model.

The Avar–Slavic nexus in the Balkans and Central Europe also illustrates the ambiguous status of Slavs between domination and partnership. In the decades around 600, Avar campaigns against the Franks as well as against Byzantium often used conflicts with Slavic groups as a pretext for intervention, while at other moments the same Slavic unions are depicted as Avar allies in wars with Germanic or Roman opponents. The boundaries of the Frankish,

Bavarian, Lombard, and Byzantine realms with Slavic lands were treated, in Avar political imagination, as extensions of the khaganate's own frontiers, yet the khaganate's effective control varied drastically from region to region and over time. After the failed siege of Constantinople in 620 and the uprising of Slavic groups under the leader Samo in the 620s–630s, Avar power entered into a long crisis, which was deepened by further Slavic migrations into the Balkans, the arrival of Croats and Serbs, and Bulgar revolts along the lower Danube. By the eighth century, Avar activity had shifted westward, while a new Danube Bulgaria consolidated a durable power in the northeastern Balkans, taking control over many of the Slavic populations that had previously been at least partially within the Avar orbit.

In this Balkan and Danubian theatre, Slavs functioned both as colonists and as a demographic base for new composite polities. The formation of Danube Bulgaria in the late seventh century brought Turkic Bulgar elites into close and enduring interaction with Slavic communities, whose language and customs came to predominate over time within a Christianized state that was formally integrated into the Byzantine diplomatic and ecclesiastical system. Meanwhile, Slavic groups in Dalmatia and inland Illyricum developed their own political structures, sometimes under Byzantine suzerainty, sometimes in shifting alliances with Bulgars, Franks, and later Venetians. The revolt of Phocas (602) and subsequent internal crises in Byzantium allowed the Danube frontier to collapse, with Moesia and parts of Illyricum formally still claimed by the empire but in reality densely settled by Slavic populations whose exact political arrangements remain only partially visible in the sources. Later medieval narratives, including those associated with the Croatian and Serbian dynasties, retrojected continuous lines of monarchical authority into this murky early period, but modern critical scholarship emphasizes the provisional character of power and the importance of local chieftains and regional alliances in organizing Slavic political life before the ninth century.

Beyond the Balkans, Slavic communities increasingly shaped the political landscape of Central and East-Central Europe. The so-called Limes Sorabicus, the early medieval Slav–German border running along the Elbe and Saale rivers, arose in the eighth century as the first clearly defined political frontier between the Frankish kingdom and west Slavic peoples such as the Sorbs and other Elbe Slavs. Initially, this border marked areas where Frankish rulers imposed tribute and occasional military intervention, but did not directly administer territory east of the rivers; Slavic tribes in this zone alternated between resistance, alliance, and partial integration into Carolingian political networks. Genetic studies of Y-chromosome polymorphisms in modern and historical German populations show that this frontier later became a zone of mixed ancestry, confirming the historical picture of colonization (Ostsiedlung) in which German settlers, autochthonous Slavs, and Balts produced new communities east of the old Limes Sorabicus. Yet in the early phase, the Elbe–Saale line represented a political boundary shaped by Slavic military power as much as by Frankish ambitions; Frankish annals from the early ninth century refer repeatedly to campaigns against Slavic tribes, the imposition of tribute, and the oscillation between war and negotiated subordination.

The role of Slavs as frontier peoples, both militarized and administratively incorporated, is particularly evident in the history of the Elbe Serbs during the age of the Ottonian dynasty. Research on the Serbian communities between the Saale and Mulde rivers has reevaluated the common stereotype that these Slavs were predominantly pro-Hungarian and simply targets of German conquest. By analyzing episodes of cooperation between Elbe Serb elites and Henry the Fowler, as well as their position in conflicts with Magyars, neighboring Slavs, and the Přemyslid principality, recent work argues that Serbian principalities preserved a significant

degree of autonomy into the 920s–940s and participated in Henry’s military reforms and border defense strategies 8. Slavic agrarii milites, identified with the vethenici-withasii mentioned by Widukind of Corvey, reveal a Serbian context to Ottonian military restructuring: Slavic warriors were integrated into border defense, while their communities retained their social and economic structures for some time 8. The introduction of direct Saxon rule, the establishment of the burgward system, and the creation of ecclesiastical institutions in White Serbia thus did not immediately erase Slavic political agency. Instead, Ottonian ethnic policy in these newly incorporated lands appears to have recognized elements of Slavic legal tradition in court practice, allowed the use of the Slavic language in certain official and private contexts, and involved local elites in new administrative structures, even as longer-term colonization and Christianization gradually transformed the region. Such patterns of negotiated integration, rather than straightforward military annihilation, characterize many early medieval frontiers between German and Slavic polities.

The expansion of Slavs into East-Central Europe is equally central to the prehistory of Rus’. Olha Shchodra’s study of the “Empire of Rus’” emphasizes that prior to the emergence of a unified Rus’ polity in southern Eastern Europe, large military-political unions of Slavic tribes had already formed, notably the Ant and Dulib unions and entities such as Greater Croatia 6. Written sources register, in the southern East European steppe and forest-steppe, a series of Slavic unions—Antae, Sclavenes, Dulibs, Volhynians, and others—that preceded the consolidation of Rus’, while archaeological findings, including gold imperial medallions in Volhynia and around Kiev, indicate the existence of powerful local rulers, probably princes, who served in or fought against the Roman and later Byzantine empires 6. The “Tale of Bygone Years” (Primary Chronicle), though compiled centuries later, preserves memories of numerous tribal princedoms—of Polianians, Drevlians, Severians, Ulichs, Tivertsy, and others—each with its own prince and political center, suggesting a mosaic of Slavic political units capable of combining into larger confederations. Shchodra points out that estimates of 120–150 Slavic tribes in Eastern Europe imply a dense map of potential power centers, many of which could be mobilized into larger coalitions under the pressure of external threats or opportunities 6. In this context, the formation of a Middle-Dnieper union of Polianians–Rus’ in the mid-first millennium, supported by archaeological evidence from local production and unique treasure hoards, represents a crucial step toward a more centralized Rus’ power. The control of key waterways and transcontinental trade routes connecting north and south, and linking western Europe with the Arab East, became the principal motive of Rus’ expansion and the foundation for what later chroniclers and modern historians call the “empire of Rus’”. Here, Slavic groups did not merely populate a hinterland supporting Scandinavian or steppe elites; they constituted the demographic and economic base of a polity whose rulers, whether of mixed or debated origin, mobilized Slavic communities for military campaigns, tribute collection, and urban development along the Dnieper corridor.

The economic dimension of Slavic political integration into early medieval Europe becomes especially clear when considering the role of slave raiding and long-distance trade. Alice Rio’s work on slaving and the funding of elite status in early medieval Europe argues that the increased profitability of slaving, particularly the capture and sale of people into external markets, reshaped internal social dynamics among elites across multiple regions, including areas with significant Slavic populations . While earlier historiography tended to separate discussions of slaves as mobile trade goods from those embedded in local labor systems, Rio suggests that, in regions tied to expansive slave markets, growing external demand for captives made slavery more central to internal elite competition as well 2. Joseph C. Miller’s concept of

“slaving as a political strategy” is employed to explain why certain marginal players—often on imperial frontiers—chose to intensify raiding and slave trading as a way to bypass more established forms of elite competition². The Slavic frontier zones, especially along the Baltic and Elbe, but also in the forest-steppe regions connected to the Rus’ trade networks, fit this pattern: elites could accumulate wealth, prestige, and foreign connections by organizing slave raids and controlling routes to markets in the Islamic world and beyond.

Archaeological research on north-western Slavs strongly supports this picture. Excavations in coastal trading places, strongholds, and associated settlements in modern north-eastern Germany, inhabited by western Slavic groups, reveal a rapid increase in economic and social complexity from the eighth century onwards. The establishment of Scandinavian–Slavic emporia along the Baltic, the construction of hillforts, and the appearance of powerful tribal rulers in written sources all point to intensified political competition, often intertwined with violence and warfare. Finds of iron chains, human remains with signs of violence in settlement contexts, and large inflows of Oriental silver coins into these regions indicate that the economic boom was driven not only by peaceful trade, but also by systematic slave hunting and raiding. Written sources from Carolingian and Ottonian times mention the sale of Slavic captives, and the structure of some strongholds and market sites suggests that they may have functioned as slave markets or holding centers. In this environment, Slavic chieftains and their warrior retinues could use slaving as a tool to fund retinues, establish alliances with Scandinavian or Frankish partners, and carve out semi-autonomous domains that negotiated with rather than simply resisted neighboring powers. Slavery thus served not merely as a background social institution, but as a political resource that integrated Slavic borderlands into wider economic and diplomatic networks.

The representation of Slavs in Latin and Byzantine historiography mirrored and shaped these political realities. The *Chronicle of Moissac*, a ninth-century universal chronicle, gave a surprisingly prominent place to Slavic groups, at a time when most western chroniclers still mentioned them mainly in annalistic notices of raids and campaigns. Sébastien Rossignol notes that Frankish sources began to refer regularly to Slavs east of the Elbe in the early ninth century, as numerous tribes became involved in conflicts and tribute relations with the Franks. These mentions are mostly brief accounts of political and military events, but their frequency and integration into broader narratives of Frankish expansion and border defense indicate that Slavs were increasingly recognized as significant players on Europe’s eastern frontier. Fredegar’s chronicle and Paul the Deacon’s *Historia Langobardorum*, analyzed by Curta, offer further clues: both authors represented Slavs at times as barbarian raiders and at other times as instrumentalized actors in the domestic politics of the Frankish and Lombard kingdoms, used as allies, proxies, or enemies to justify internal power shifts. The “scourge of God” image coexisted with depictions of Slavic groups as *gentes subjectae*, tributary peoples who could be mobilized by kings against rival factions or neighboring realms. These dual images reinforced western European perceptions of Slavs as simultaneously threatening and available for instrumental use, a view that persisted into later medieval and modern historiography.

The political situation of the early European Middle Ages cannot be adequately described without placing Slavic-speaking populations at its center. From the sixth to the eleventh century, Slavs were not a passive backdrop to imperial expansion, but active participants in the making and unmaking of frontiers, the formation of polities, and the integration of Europe into broader economic and ideological networks. Their migrations and settlements reshaped the Balkans and

Central Europe; their alliances and conflicts with Avars, Bulgars, Franks, and Byzantines determined the fate of key border zones; their elites exploited the opportunities of trade, especially in slaves, to fund military power; and their communities provided the demographic foundation for states from Danube Bulgaria to Rus' and the Elbe principalities. At the same time, external representations of "the Slavs" in Byzantine, Latin, and Arabic sources, along with later medieval and modern historiographical constructions, have often obscured the diversity and agency of these groups under totalizing labels. Recent scholarship, combining critical source analysis, archaeology, and even genetics, increasingly views early medieval Slavs as heterogeneous actors embedded in regional contexts, whose political roles ranged from raiders and tributaries to rulers and cultural intermediaries. Understanding their position in the early medieval political order thus requires both reconstruction of concrete power structures and deconstruction of inherited stereotypes, yielding a more nuanced picture in which Slavic societies appear as co-creators of medieval Europe's political map rather than as marginal or belated entrants.

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