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The battle of Nedao. A new hypothesis

ABSTRACT

One of the most famous battles of antiquity, the Battle of Nedao (circa 454), pitted the Huns and their loyal vassals against a coalition of rebellious vassals. The battle's location to this day is unknown, since its eponymous marker (the Nedao River) remains unidentified. While various hypotheses have proposed locations that are typically in the western half of the Carpathian Basin, this study argues that the battle took place on the southeastern fringe of the basin. By corroborating local toponymy and topography with the Norse Saga of Hervör and Heidrek (while deprioritising the account of Jordanes) – the present study argues that the battle took place between the left bank of the Danube and the right bank of the Nera River (modern Serbia).

KEYWORDS

Huns, Goths, Attila, Nedao River, Pannonia



The primary source for the Battle of Nedao is *Getica* – a book on the Goths by the 6th century writer Jordanes, who was a Christian Roman of Gothic ancestry living somewhere in the Balkans. His account of the Battle of Nedao as the culmination of major interregnum infighting after Attila's death is consistent with the rest of the battle's specifications and geopolitical fallout. Several Germanic nations are listed as taking part, as well as the Alans and Huns, such that most, if not all, of the empire's vassals took part. The losing Hun-led faction suffered nearly 30,000 dead, according to Jordanes, while losses for the winning Gepid-led coalition are not mentioned. The surviving Huns fled to the eastern extremity of their empire, the Dnieper River, with the victors taking their place in the Carpathian Basin. While Jordanes describes the location as *Pannonia* and near the river *Nedao*, the Norse saga mentions the *Danubian Heath* and other topographical features (Fig. 1).

The most hypothesised location of the Nedao River is as a left-bank tributary of the Sava River: see Diculescu (1922), Várady (1969), Maenchen-Helfen (1973) and Wolfram (1980). Earlier research linked the Nedao with the Nitra or Leitha rivers, see Lotter (2003). Horedt (1980) suggested the northern area of the Carpathian Basin. Pohl (1980) hypothesized a location west of the Tisza, while Wirth (1999) proposed the region east of the Middle Danube, which is also the view of Gračanin and Škrkulja (2014).

In assessing the validity of the present study's hypothesis that the modern Nera River is the Nedao of antiquity, it is necessary to discredit the Pannonian hypothesis. Since the Battle of Nedao involved the Huns and their many intra-imperial vassals, it is unlikely that such a key battle would have taken place in a location that would have required the Danube River to be crossed by

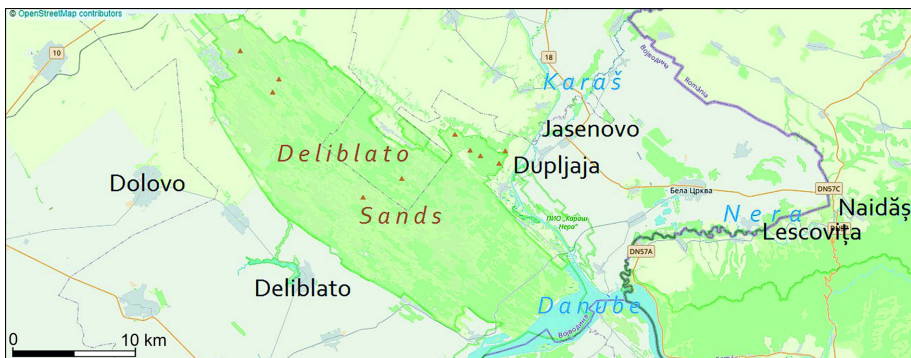


FIG. 1. The Map of Danube - Nera

tens of thousands of combatants. Modern sources only include small parts of Pannonia as being under Attila's yoke, or sometimes none. The Nera River region, by contrast, would have been a convenient geographic midpoint between the Hunnic heartland and Dacia (which by that time was already populated by Gepids and other Goths). While such a location was outside Pannonia, it was close by, leading Jordanes or his source to possibly impart a Romano-centric bias for simplicity. The area, which bordered Moesia Superior, also lay close by to the realm of the Yazyges (Alans) – meaning that the area was on the somewhat ambiguous fringes of four regions through the preceding centuries. Moreover, in the century of Jordanes' writing, the Pannonian outpost of Sirmium had changed ownership a handful of times between the Ostrogoths, Gepids and Romans.

The river Nera – then in Dacia and now in the modern region of *Banat* – is at an interesting geomorphic and administrative crossroads. The name *Banat* is assumed to be derived from the word *ban* (vicero), meaning the realm of a viceroy, however this has not been conclusively proven. The suffix *-at* is neither Uralic nor Indo-European, but Turkic (cf. *sultanate*, *khaganate*). Though probably coincidental, the name *Banat* anagrammatically resembles the *Netab* root of the lost and unidentifiable *Netabio* in Pannonia, mentioned in the *Ravenna Cosmographia*, that may have been associated with Jordanes' river Nedao.

The river Nera has an etymological backstory that is also shrouded in mystery. In antiquity, it may have been known as the *Apus River* (Henderson, 1927), although this may have referred to the Karaš River instead. When and why the name changed is unknown, however what is known from old maps is that the Nera was known as the *Neraj* (also *Nerai*); see Lizars (1831). Older forms of the name may have included the letter *d*, since a key settlement on the Nera is the town of Naidăș – the namesake of the Năidășul tributary. The Hungarian word *nádas* means *reed bed* or *reedy*, and is a common name for streams and rivers in the eastern Carpathian Basin. The word *nád* (reed) is a borrowing from an Iranian tongue – inherited either from the Yazyges who were present in the basin since the first century, or adopted from other Sarmatians when the ancestral Hungarians (Magyars) lived on the Eurasian steppe.

The Nera River, while not insignificant, is a minor river at the foothills of a small protruding ridge of the Carpathian Mountains. Its role as a geomarker by Jordanes may have been because, on the left bank of the Danube in those times, there were no settlements. The sparsely populated, obtuse sector of land adjacent to the Nera and Danube, it will be argued, contains local toponyms

and features of the natural environment that can be matched to the battle site described in *The Saga of Hervör and Heidrek (Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks)*.

The thirteenth century Norse compendium of sagas preserved from a millennium earlier includes the heroic poem *Hlöðskviða* – a narration of the leadup and outcome of the battle between the Goths and the Huns. The first point of distinction is that the account uses many topographical descriptors. It refers to the event as taking place on the *Danubian Heath (Dúnheiðr)*. Modern use of the word *heath* has somewhat broadened in definition, however the traditional meaning denotes areas of sandy and infertile soils; wastelands of meagre vegetation that remain uncultivated. Such a landscape is present in the territory between the left bank of the Danube and right bank of the Nera. A large tract of land known as the *Deliblato Sands (Deliblatska Peščara)* has been protected in modern times as a special nature reserve on account of its unique biome – considered by some to be Europe's largest desert.

To the west of the *Deliblato Sands* is the small village of *Dolovo*, another toponym which arguably has a cognate in the *Hlöðskviða*. The battle is described as taking place at *Dylgja* and the *Dylgja Dales (Dylgjudölum)* – the latter of which may be a slight tautology if the place name is etymologically related to the kind of undulating terrain defined by *dales*. The word, however, can also be used to refer to valleys. The modern village of *Dolovo* still features troughs and dales as part of its unusual landscape and this may have been more widespread in the region before large scale agriculture. The irregular terrain of the general area is conducive to the sort of underhanded strategies that Mingarelli (2018) attributes to King Ardaric from Jordanes' remark: *Ardarici gladius conspiratioque peremit*.

Tolkien (1960) believed that *Dylgja* was probably not a place name but a metaphor meaning enmity or strife; however, this view has fallen out of favour. The name *Deliblato*, while also superficially resembling the topography of dales, is likely coincidental, since *déli* means *southern* in Hungarian. Another etymology proposes the compound personification of *deli* (*crazy* in Turkish) + *blato* (*mud* in Slavic) that may have been used by locals to describe the phenomenon of quicksand. Yet another town in the vicinity – *Dupljaja* – has a name of seemingly exotic provenance, with some semblance to *Dylgja*.

The *Hlöðskviða* goes on to narrate the custom of marking battle grounds with branches of the hazel tree (*haslaði*). An old town on the Nera River to this day bears the name *Lescovița* – a Romanian rendering of a Slavic toponym that refers to the hazel tree. The *Hlöðskviða* arguably mentions another arboreal marker for the heralded battle site: the *Jassar Fells* or *Mounts of Jass*

(*Jassarfjöllum*). Tolkien (1960) renders the locution as *Hills of Ash*, referring to trees of the *Fraxinus* genus. The name does resemble the Slavic term (*jasen*) for this species of trees, which grows throughout the Carpathian Basin. Between the Nera River and the Deliblato Sands lies the town of Jasenovo, which may be a coincidence as such toponyms are not rare. One could also logically imagine the ash trees featuring prominently on the mountains south of the Nera River, technically part of the Carpathians. Indeed, the saga uses the same word (*fjöllum*) in describing the Carpathians (*Harvaða fjöllum*), suggesting that *hills* is not the best translation.

An alternative explanation for the *Mounts of Jass* is that they refer to the Yazyges (Jaszi, Iazyges) of Alanic (Sarmatian) origin. This explanation is to be preferred since (1) semantic concordance between *Jassar* and *Jasen* is somewhat weak, (2) Slavs were not widespread or linguistically influential in the fifth century, (3) Montane forests of the region are typically mixed rather than of a visibly uniform species. Pritsak (1981) links the *Jassarfjöllum* to the Jas/Alanic mountains between the Donets and Sukhyi Torets rivers in modern Ukraine. However, such a toponym could have instead referred to a subset of the Carpathian Mountains in modern Transylvania, whose range bordered or traversed the territory of the Yazyges already present since the first century.

Overall, the several physical features introduced by the *Hlöðskviða* leave a somewhat restrictive scope of possibility in corroborating the Battle of Nedao with other historical sources and modern geography. But as Mingarelli (2018) points out with respect to the accounts of other battles by Jordanes, large grass plains are clearly identified with Catalaunia and Bolia, but not with Nedao. This parameter virtually disqualifies the central Hungarian plain, leaving only the upper and lower reaches of the Middle Danube as probable locations of the Nedao, with the conditional inclusion of the Sava Basin. While Tolkien (1960) like his predecessors is dismissive of the historicity of the Norse sagas, a more tentative approach considers them of complimentary value to the sources from antiquity, at least for topographical information. The archaeological record is unlikely to have preserved artefacts from the Battle of Nedao that could warrant conclusive identification of the site – the only remote possibility lies with the fact that the Hunnic king, Elak, is known to have perished and therefore could have received a proper burial in situ.

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