

The Byzantine-Lazic Phalanx at the Battle of the Hippis River (550 CE)

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Abstract: The Battle of the Hippis River¹ represents a major event of the Lazic War (541-562 CE) and one of the key confrontations between the Byzantine and Sasanian Persian armies in the Caucasus region. In the aftermath of the battle, the Persians were forced to retreat from Lazica while the Byzantine and Lazic forces laid siege to the fortress of Petra. Byzantine historian Prokopios' account of the battle offers interesting details and insights on infantry and cavalry tactics of this period and remains important for the study of military history of the Late Antiquity.

Key words: Late Antiquity, Lazic War

Lazica before the battle of the river Hippis

In 548/49, Persian general Mihr-Mihroe campaigned in Lazica where he sought to relief the Persian garrison of Petra, the most important fortress in southwestern Caucasia, that was besieged by the Byzantines and the Lazic forces. Mihr-Mihroe succeeded in his task, forcing his opponent to lift the siege. He then left about 5,000 men under the command of Phabrizos and three other commanders in Lazica and marched with the rest of the army to Persarmenia, where, in the words of Prokopios, he "remained quietly in the country around Dvin" (Prokopios, 2014, p. 142).² As the Persian army departed, the Byzantines and the Lazians sought to recover their positions. Their forces, under joint command of the Byzantine general Dagisthaeus and the Lazic king Goubazes, routed Phabrizos' detachment and once again besieged Petra. In response, a large Persian force led by general Chorienes, "a man of wide experience in many wars" (Prokopios, 2014, p. 463), invaded Lazica and camped on the banks of the Hippis River. Receiving intelligence on the Persian whereabouts, Giubazes and Dagisthaeus held a council of war and decided to confront the enemy (Prokopios, 2014, p. 476). They marched to the Hippis and encamped on the opposite riverbank, still uncertain, in the words of the Byzantine chronicler, "whether it would be more advantageous to wait there and receive the enemy's attack or whether they should advance upon their enemy" (Prokopios, 2014, p. 476). Goubazes was eager to fight because he was concerned about the impact a prolonged presence of large military forces would have on his realm. He suggested launching first attack with his Lazic forces while the Byzantines were to join the battle at a later stage (Prokopios, 2014, p. 476-477). First charge was considered crucial to the outcome of the battle and the eagerness of the Lazic forces to fight was a factor that the Lazic and Byzantine commanders clearly took into account.³

¹ Present-day Tskhenistskali River in north-west Georgia; "tskheni" is a horse in Georgian as the "Hippo" in Greek.

² According to Prokopios, main reason why Mihr-Mihroe left Lazica, was the lack of provision for his numerous army. Persians had brought some resources with them but it was not enough to feed the army of thirty thousand man and the garrison of Petra at the same time. Also, "it seemed to him [Mihr-Mihroe] unnecessary to leave more men there, as there was no enemy present at all" (Prokopios, 2014, p. 142).

³ Discussing battle experiences in ancient Rome and Greece, Polybius noted that "the wars in Greece and Asia were as a rule settled by one battle, or in rare cases by two; and the battles themselves were decided by the result of the first charge and shock of the two armies." (Polybius, 1889)

Opposing armies and their disposition

On the eve of the battle, King Goubazes gave a fervent speech urging his soldiers to fight. The Byzantine and Lazic commanders then deployed their forces, with the Lazic cavalry in the front line and supported by the Byzantine horsemen under the command of “Philegagos, a Gepid by birth and an energetic man, and Ioannes the Armenian, son of Thomas, an exceptionally able warrior...” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 477). The third battle line comprised of combined Byzantine-Lazic infantry led by Goubazes and Dagisthaeus, who reasoned that “if the cavalry were routed, they would be saved easily by falling back on them” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 477). Unfortunately Prokopios does not offer any details on the Byzantine-Lazic cavalry but, from his account of the battle, it becomes clear that these horsemen had lighter armor and equipment than their Persian counterparts and were reluctant to battle without infantry support. Prokopios’ narrative also shows that the Byzantine and Lazic horsemen had the necessary tactical knowledge and experience to fight side by side with an infantry force that was organized a phalanx formation. It must be noted also that Prokopios does describe the arms and armour of the Byzantine-Lazic infantry: foot soldiers were armed with shields, spears and bows and were clearly sufficiently experienced in joint operations with cavalry as well as knowledgeable about their Persian opponents’ tactics.

The Byzantine-Lazic army consisted of about 14,000 men when it had earlier confronted Phabrizos’ detachment of 5,000 soldiers. That battle resulted in few casualties because, in the words of the chronicler, “the Romans and Lazoi at early dawn unexpectedly fell upon them... the majority [of the Persians] were caught and killed...” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 143) Prokopios notes that after the battle, Dagisthaeus and Goubazes “left many of the Lazoi in the pass so that it might no longer be possible for the Persians to bring supplies to Petra, and they returned with all the plunder and the captives” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 143). It is safe to assume that after Chorianes’ army entered Lazica, Goubazes and Dagisthaeus, who were in dire need of reinforcements, recalled their garrisons from mountain passes in the borderlands of Iberia and Lazica. As the result, the combined forces of Byzantines and Lazians probably included between 12,000 and 14,000 men.

Much fewer details are available on the Persian side. Chorianes’ army must have been of considerable size and good quality since Prokopios mentions that it had at least one thousand cataphracts, “armed and armoured in the best way” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 477). The Persian general dispatched cataphracts (heavy-armored cavalry, *aswaran*) to conduct reconnaissance while he followed them with the remaining troops, most of whom were light horsemen (mainly horse archers) and light infantry.⁴ Persian infantry (*paygan*) comprised mostly of archers who served a secondary or supportive role on the battle field. The Byzantine chronicler considered the Persian archers among the best and noted that they were “taught to shoot much more rapidly than any other men”; during the battle, they employed their bows “emboldened by the hope that by a rain of missiles they would easily rout their enemy” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 48, 479). It is important to mention that the army of the Sasanian empire, as the armies of the previous Persian kingdoms, was multinational. Persian *spah* (army) recruited amongst the warrior peoples of northern Persia, including the tough Dailamite fighters, who proved especially valuable to the empire as combat infantry, the Gils of modern day Gilan, and people of Gorgan, who were mainly used as light cavalry. In addition, the Albanians, Armenians and the nomad peoples from Central Asia also

⁴ Chorianes’ also left small number of soldiers to guard the camp that was built on the bank of River Hippis.

served in the Persian army of this period (Farrokh, 2017, p. 20-21).⁵ The army of Chorianes included Allied forces, most notably the Alans from the North Caucasus (Farrokh, 2017, p. 21). According to Prokopios, they were “an autonomous nation, who are for the most part allied with the Persians and march against the Romans and their other enemies”(Prokopios, 2014, p. 467). Alan heavy horsemen and light horse-archers were the formidable warriors of this period.. During the VI century, they were the permanent members of the Persian armies. Warriors from this nomad tribe served under the Byzantine banner as well. Their service was dependent on generous salary or on the possibility to loot the enemy territory (Дмитриев, 2011, p. 30-32).⁶

It's easily predictable that the Persians promptly received an information about the defeat of Phabrizos units and have learned about the strength and numbers of the Lazic-Byzantine army. So we can suppose that Chorianes had much larger and better equipped and supplied army than Phabrizos when he invaded Lazica. We can clearly see in the process of the battle that neither army has great numerical superiority. As we have mentioned above, after the Chorianes entered Lazica, allied forces of the Alans also joined his army. Lazic-Byzantine army swiftly started to move against the Persians to defeat them in open battle. Byzantines and the Lazians had the possibility to retreat in the north-west part of the country and fight the defensive war against the opponent. Fact that they decided to fight pitched battle on the open place can lead us to the conclusion that the armies of Goubazes and Dagisthaeus together and the Persian commander Chorianes had no significant numerical superiority on each other. It seems that Persians also wanted to meet the opposite force in decisive battle and their commander was confident that his army was strong enough to defeat the Lazic-Byzantine forces. So we can conclude that Chorianes had at least 12 but no more than 15 thousand soldiers in his army.

Battle

The battle started with the initial charge of the Lazic cavalry and the ensuing cavalry melee. According to Procopius: “when they [Lazians] came suddenly upon the advance party of the enemy, they did not bear the sight of them but immediately wheeled their horses around and began to gallop back to the rear in complete disorder. In their rush they joined in with the Romans, not refusing to take refuge with the very men beside whom they had previously been unwilling to array themselves” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 478). This passage suggests that the much-lighter armoured Lazians did not venture to confront the heavily armoured Persian cataphracts and decided to join their forces with Byzantines since together they had better chances of confronting enemy attack. “When the two forces came close to each other, neither side at first opened the attack or joined battle, but each army drew back as their opponents advanced and in turn followed them as they withdrew, and they consumed much time in retreats, counter-pursuits, and swiftly executed changes of front”(Prokopios, 2014, p. 478). Prokopios makes no attempt to describe cavalry movements and tactics but we may attempt to reconstruct some tactical details based on the early Byzantine military manual “Strategikon”. According to this manual, cavalry units were usually deployed no less than five and no more than ten men deep, notwithstanding how strong or weak the tagmas might be. “Strategikon” also observed that “it had formerly been regarded as

⁵ For an interesting discussion of the Sassanid military-administrative organization see (Zakeri, 1995, p. 31-90).

⁶ Chosroes I went on war against the Alans, who were forced to send the envoys to the Persian king and ask for the peace and friendship. After that they become the allies of Persia. According to V. Dmitriev, battle of the river Hippis is one of the best examples to confirm the fact that the Alans were the allies of the Persians at this time (Дмитриев, 2011, p. 30-32).

sufficient to form the ranks four deep in each tagma, greater depth being viewed as useless and serving no purpose. For there can be no pressure from the rear up through the ranks, as happens with an infantry formation, which may force the men in front to push forward against their will" (Strategikon, 2010, p. 27-28). Prokopios offers only scant details on individual encounters during this initial stage of fighting. He writes, for example, that Byzantine cavalryman Artabanes (from Persarmenia) challenged a Persian horseman, who was "a man of spirited valor and great bodily strength" (Prokopios, 2014, p. 478). Artabanes "killed him immediately with his spear and, throwing him from his horse, brought him down to the ground" (Prokopios, 2014, p. 478). Moments later another Persian wounded Artabanes but he was then, in turn, killed by a Byzantine cavalryman who was Goth by birth. Unable to resist the Byzantine-Lazic charges, the Persian cataphracts fell back to regroup and wait for Chorianes and the rest of the army (Prokopios, 2014, p. 478).

After the Persian withdrawal, Byzantine commanders John and Philegages realized that their cavalry would be unable to cope with a renewed Persian cavalry charge and decided to fall back towards infantry commanded by Goubazes and Dagisthaeus. The Lazic dismounted cavalry also joined them to form the phalanx: "They then arrayed themselves on foot in a phalanx, as deep as possible, and all stood with a front facing the enemy and thrusting out their spears against them" (Prokopios, 2014, p. 478).

This passage in Prokopios' chronicle contains important details about infantry tactics of the late antiquity. When infantry was formed in organized units and moved in tight ranks, it well defended from the cavalry, but unorganized and widely formed infantry formation had no ability to withstand the attack of heavy horsemen. Indeed, most common infantry formation in late Roman armies was the defensive phalanx (MacDowall, 1995, p. 30; Harward, 2009, p. 47). According to the Anonymous early medieval Byzantine author phalanx is a formation of armed men designed to hold off the enemy. It may assume a variety of shapes: the circle, the lozenge, the rhomboid, the wedge, the hollow wedge, and many others (Dennis 1985, p. 46; Harward, 2009, p. 47). Phalanx could be formed up in either four, eight or 16 ranks. It was easier to reduce frontage than expand, because of the accordion effect such a manoeuvre would have had on flanking units. In most cases an eight-rank formation was used, striking a balance between increasing staying power through depth and getting as many men as possible into action (MacDowall, 1995, p. 30). In some aspects the Byzantine phalanx was similar to the Old Greek phalanx, but the spears used by the Byzantines were only two meters long, a third of the length of the Old Greek sarissa, and the depth of the phalanx was no more than 16 men deep because the Byzantine commanders had decided that if the phalanx was any deeper it was a less effective use of manpower (Harward, 2009, p. 47).⁷ Various ranks in a formation performed different tasks: the first four ranks were expected to do the real fighting were more heavily armed. The file closers in the rear rank had a supervisory role, while the men in the intervening ranks were to provide depth to the formation and throw light javelins over the heads of the front ranks (Harward, 2009, p. 48-49).⁸ Attached archers from other units would be drawn up behind and also fire overhead (MacDowall, 1995, p. 30-31). David Nicolle notes that the front two ranks of the byzantine formation would shoot their bows horizontally against the enemy's cavalry, those to the rear shooting high to drop their arrows on the enemy, thus hopefully

⁷ The Strategikon says that fewer than four ranks did not have enough staying power and more than 16 added nothing to the unit's strength (Harward, 2009, p. 47).

⁸ Some men were armed with franciscii, which were throwing axes. Slingers and Plumbatae (short arrows, or darts) throwers were also often used (Harward, 2009, p. 48-49).

forcing them to raise their shields and thus expose their horses to arrows. The infantrymen would place their spears on the ground and only pick them up if the enemy came close (Nicolle, 2011, p. 21).

According to German military historian Hans Delbrück, there was not any significant difference between the arms and armour of Byzantine soldiers in the late antiquity. Foot soldiers and the horsemen, ranged and melee weapons – all of these things were mixed with each other. Heavily armed horsemen used ranged weapons and also had an ability to fight in the infantry ranks. It will be fair to say that the horseman was the universal soldier of this age and the regular infantry almost vanished from the Byzantine armies (Дельбрюк, 1999, p. 294). Partly it's true, because in the late antiquity cavalry had a significantly important role on the battlefield than in the past. "But heavily armored, well-trained, and organized infantry remained the mainstay of the Byzantine army, without which the improvements in Byzantine cavalry would have been useless. These infantry formations were capable of effectively defeating mounted nomadic charges but normally unable to annihilate them. However, if properly supported by cavalry, they could shatter enemy cavalry formations, which would then be enveloped and crushed between the combined weight of Byzantine cavalry and infantry" (Harward, 2009, 45). Importance of infantry warfare is well shown in contemporary historical sources, like the Procopius' description of the battle of the river Hippis.

After the Persians faced the enemy phalanx, according to Procopius, they "did not know what to do, for they were unable to charge their opponents, who were now on foot, nor could they break their phalanx, because the horses, afraid of the spear-points and the clashing of the shields, balked; and so they all resorted to their bows, emboldened by the hope that by a rain of missiles they would easily rout their enemy. The Romans and all the Lazians began to do exactly the same. So from each side the arrows were flying thickly into both armies, and on both sides many men were falling" (Procopius, 2014, p. 478-479). Grant Harward points out that no intelligent Persian general would send his cavalry against a formed line of Byzantine infantry, properly trained, armed, and in good spirits. Instead the classic tactics of a mounted army was to envelope the enemy, avoiding a frontal charge, attacking the flanks and rear, causing panic and routing the enemy (Harward, 2009, p. 50). Supposedly Persian general Chorianes tried to outflank the Lazic-Byzantine Phalanx, but their position was well defended and they were able to protect the flanks and the rear of the army. Also, it is important to mention that the infantry of the Lazians seems to be an experienced and well-trained force, able to fight in the disciplined ranks of the Byzantine phalanx and hold the line against Persian and the Alan heavy cavalry and horse-archers.

At this stage in battle, according to Prokopios, "the Persians and Alans were discharging their missiles in a practically continuous stream and much faster than their opponents. However, the Roman shields blocked most of them" (Prokopios, 2014, p. 479). The Persian superiority in archery is a recurring theme in Prokopios' work. While discussing the battle of Callinicum (531 AD), Procopius also notes the difference between the Roman and the Persian archery: "Persians are almost all archers and are taught to shoot much more rapidly than any other men, still they shoot from bows that are weak and not strung very tightly, so that their missiles, hitting the breastplate, perhaps, or helmet or shield of a Roman soldier, were deflected and had no power to hurt the man who was hit. Roman archers, by contrast, are always slower but inasmuch as their bows are extremely stiff and tightly strung, and one might add that they are handled by stronger men, they easily slay much greater numbers of those they hit than do the Persians, for no armor proves an obstacle to the flight of their arrows (Prokopios, 2014, p. 47-48)". Maurice's *Strategikon* also mentions that the Persians "are more practiced in rapid, although not powerful archery" (Strategikon, 2010, p. 114). Byzantines had improved their archery in V-VI

centuries and adopted heavy and powerful bow from the Huns, which made the Byzantine archers more effective than the Sasanian ones (Bivar, 1972, p. 283-286). According to the VI century Byzantine military manuals, Byzantine archers used Hunnic method to draw the bow; this method is also known as the “Mongolian draw”⁹ or “thumb draw”, because the archer uses only the thumb, the strongest single digit, to grasp the string. The thumb draw was popular among the Steppe nomads and it was one of the reasons of military success of their archers. Sasanians had different method of drawing the bow, which they did not change even after two centuries of contact with the Chionites and Hephthalites. Persians drew the string with the three lower fingers of the right hand, but the index finger pointed toward the target (Bivar, 1972, p. 283-286). This method was not as effective as “Mongolian draw”, so the Byzantines often were the victors in the duel against the Persian archers.

Overall, the battle of the River Hippis resembles the encounter Byzantine infantry and Persian cavalry had had at Callinicum. Describing that engagement, Prokopios writes:

“[Belisarios] gave up his horse and commanded all his men to do the same and, on foot with the others, to fight off the oncoming enemy. Those of the Persians who were following the men in flight, after pursuing for only a short distance, immediately returned and charged the infantry and Belisarios with the others. The Romans then turned their backs to the river, so that they might not be surrounded by the enemy, and, as best they could under the circumstances, defended themselves against their assailants. And again the battle became fierce, although the two sides were not evenly matched in strength, for foot soldiers, and few of them at that, were fighting against the whole Persian cavalry. Still, the enemy were unable to rout them or in any other way overpower them. For standing shoulder-to-shoulder, they kept themselves grouped at all times in a small space and barricaded themselves most securely behind their shields, so that they shot at the Persians more conveniently than they were shot at by them. Many a time after giving up, the barbarians would advance against them again determined to break up and destroy their line, but they always withdrew again from the assault unsuccessful. For their horses, frightened by the clashing of the shields, reared up and made confusion for themselves and their riders (Prokopios, 2014, p. 48-49)”.

This passage offers good insights into advanced Byzantine infantry tactics of VI century and the firmness of their phalanx formation. Prokopios’ descriptions of the battles of Callinicum and on the River Hippis thus provide complimentary information that allows for a fuller reconstruction of infantry and cavalry combat experience in late antiquity.

The battle’s decisive moment was the death of the Persian commander Chorianes. According to Prokopios: “In the course of this battle Chorianes, the commander of the Persians, happened to be hit. By whom he was wounded was not clear to anyone; some chance guided the shaft as it came out of a crowded mass of men, fastened itself in the man’s neck, and killed him outright, and so by one man’s death the battle turned and victory fell to the Romans” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 479). Disheartened, the Persians and the Alans retreated disorderedly to their camp, where the Byzantines and the Lazians followed “upon their heels and killed many, hoping to capture the camp of their opponents with one rush” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 479). Here Prokopios, once again, offers details on a personal combat: “one of the Alans, who was a man of great courage and bodily strength and who knew unusually well how to shoot rapidly to either side, took his stand at the entrance of the stockade, which was narrow, and

⁹ This is often called the “Mongolian draw” but it was used by all ethnicities across the Asian steppes not only the Mongols.

unexpectedly blocked the oncoming Romans for a long time. But Ioannes, the son of Thomas, came up to him alone and instantly killed the man with a spear, and so the Romans and Lazoi captured the camp” (Prokopios, 2014, p. 479). This incident slightly resembles the one in the famous battle of Stamford Bridge, where the giant Norse axeman blocked the narrow crossing and single-handedly held up the entire Anglo-Saxon army until the English soldier floated under the bridge in a half-barrel and thrust his spear through the planks in the bridge, mortally wounding him (Swanton, 2000, p. 198).

At the end of the battle there is a mention about the fortified camp of the Persian and the Alan army. According to “Strategikon”, the Persians “going to war, they encamp within fortifications. When the time of battle draws near they surround themselves with ad tich and a sharpened palisade” (Strategikon, 2010, p. 114) Unlike the Persians, the Alans, who were the nomad tribes, usually never fortified camps during the military campaigns. “Strategikon” claims that the nomads “do not encamp within entrenchments, as do the Persians and the Romans” (Strategikon, 2010, p. 116-117).

The battle of the river Hippis was the largest battle fought during the Lazic War. The defeat on the Hippis River claimed a larger share of the Persian field army and seriously undermined Persian positions in Lazica. In the aftermath of the battle, the Byzantines and Lazians besieged the fortress of Petra, whose garrison was fully supplied by the retreating Persian forces but was still unable to resist for too long. In 551, the Byzantines and Lazians under the command of famous Byzantine general Bessas finally captured and destroyed Petra. This Byzantine success meant that that, the Persian plan to conquer Lazica and challenge the Byzantine dominance in the Black Sea littoral had failed. The Lazic-Byzantine victory in the battle of the River Hippis marked the beginning of Byzantine predominance in Lazica and the turning point of the Lazic War against the Persians.

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