

Lazian Army of the Lazic War (541-562 CE)

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Abstract: Lazic War (541-562 CE) is one of the largest conflicts ever happened in the Caucasus, between the most powerful empires of late antiquity – Byzantine empire and Sasanian Iran. Lazica, the modern western part of Georgia, was under Byzantine influence, but the Sasanians, after the occupation of the Iberian (Kartlian) kingdom in the first half of the 6th century, tried to conquer Lazica to gain a strategic position on the shores of the Black sea against their main rivals, the Byzantines. Lazian kingdom, which at this time was under the influence of the Byzantine empire, stood between the two major powers of the Mediterranean and the middle east. Mostly as the Byzantine allies, the Lazi fought against Iran and only in certain circumstances they were under the Sasanian banner. The article examines the Lazian army before and during the Lazic War, their numbers, armament, and organization.

key words: Lazica, byzantines, Sasanians.

The Kingdom of Lazica, which arose in late antiquity period on the territory of modern West Georgia and, according to Byzantine historians, considered itself the heir of the ancient Colchians, found itself in a difficult geopolitical situation in V-VI centuries. Military units of the interested parties - Byzantines and Iranians - were often deployed on its territory. The Lazian kings changed their political orientation depending on which side was stronger during the specified period.

Naturally, the Lazi did not have the proper human and economic resources to fight the empires on their own for a long period of time, but without an alliance with them, the empires also could not easily establish their influence on such an inaccessible region with difficult terrain and scarce resources, as the Southwestern Caucasus in the Late Antiquity period. The Lazian army participated in a number of important military operations, mostly side by side with the Byzantines against the Iranians. With a good knowledge of the terrain and fighting experience in these conditions, they were precious allies in Lazica for the military leaders sent by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian to fight the Iranians. The article will discuss the history of the Lazian army in V-VI centuries based on historical sources of Late Antiquity – numerical strength, resources, organization, armament, tactics and command. The examination of these issues in general is important for the study of such a large-scale late antiquity conflict, as the Lazic War.

The Kingdom of Lazica

In the 5th-6th centuries CE, the territory of the Kingdom of Lazica mainly included modern western Georgia. The borders of the Kingdom looked something like this: they started from present-day north Abkhazia and ended at the extreme southern part of modern Adjara. Its borders are almost equal to the borders of historical Colchis, which, according to Procopius of Caesarea, the Lazi people considered their ancestor and boasted about the name of the Colchians. “Colchis, as a historical and geographical region, includes entire West Georgia. Its physical and geographical boundaries are: Caucasus high mountains from the north; the Lesser Caucasus (or Anti-Caucasus), Adjara-Lazeti highland from the south; Surami or Likhi ridge from the east, and the Black Sea from the west” (Gamkrelidze, 1993, p. 24). There are different opinions about the borders of the Kingdom of Lazica, namely about the southern border, the difference between which is small and is not given much importance when discussing the area of war.

By the fifth century, the Lazians had become the dominant people in Western Transcaucasia, where other peoples of the region were creating the Empire of Lazica. It is true that the creation of the Empire of Lazica is not reflected in our sources, but it can be quite clearly seen that emerged with the consent of the emperor himself. The main outcome of this was that Colchis was replaced by Lazica (Braundi, 2014, p. 398). In Lazica, apart from the Kingdom of Lazica, there were two dependent principalities - the Abazgians and the Svani. They bordered on Lazica from the northwest and north. The Abazgians were settled on the territory of modern-day Abkhazia, and the Svani - on the lands of both modern Svaneti and adjacent territories. There were a lot of them, and as can be seen, their obedience to the king of Lazica was rather fragile, as well as that of the Abazgians¹. Their participation in the battle against the Byzantines or Iranians, together with the army of the Kingdom of Lazica, is not found anywhere in historical sources. On the southwestern coastal strip, where the name of the Lazians was first attested, Pontus Polemoniacus was located under the direct rule of the Byzantines (Braundi, 2014, p. 405). The south-western Georgian tribe, the Tzanoi, closely related to the Lazi, used to live to the east of Pontus Polemoniacus. They often served in the Byzantine army and were notable for their special fighting ability². From the north, the nomadic peoples of the steppe, the Huns and Alans, were neighbors of the vassals of Lazica - Svanians and Abazgians. After the Kingdom of Iberia was abolished in the east, Sasanian Iran became a direct neighbor of Lazica that allowed Shah Chosroes to take a hard line in order to gain dominance over Lazica for the war with Byzantium. At the same time, Iran strengthened the hands in the Iranian part of Armenia, Persarmenia, where, unlike Iberia, larger forces could be deployed and supplied³.

In the second half of the 5th century, when Goubazes I ruled in Lazica, and Marcian in Byzantium, a military clash took place between Byzantium and Lazica. Opposing Byzantium, Lazica fell under the influence of Iran. Its kings had to go to Ctesiphon for receiving

¹ As can be seen from the Iranian-Byzantine Treaty of 422, the rulers appointed by the Lazians in Svaneti from that time were approved by the Romans (Braundi, 2014, p. 389). The Empire of Lazica, along with the Svani, included their mountain neighbors, the Scymni, as well as the Apsilii, who lived to the west of the Abazgians, and the Misimians, who lived to the north and east of the Apsilians (Braundi, 2014, p. 404).

² In this place from the beginning lived barbarians, the Tzanoi people, subject to no one, called Sanoi in early times. They made plundering expeditions against the Romans who lived there. Sittas had defeated them in battle before this war, after which by many kind words and deeds he had been able to win them over completely. For they changed their manner of life to a more civilized sort, enrolled themselves among the Roman soldiery, and from that time they have gone forth against the enemy with the rest of the Roman army. They also abandoned their own religion for a more pious faith, and all of them became Christians. Such, then, was the history of the Tzanoi" (Prokopios, 2014, p. 39; Georgika, II, 1965, p. 54).

³ According to Procopius, there were the fortresses of Bolon and Pharangion, in which the Iranians "dig for gold and bring it to the king" (Georgika, II, 1965, p. 52), so Persarmenia was important to the Iranians in this regard as well.

investiture, Zoroastrianism had a quasi-official status in the country, although Christian missions were active as well (Evans, 2000, p. 92). After 522, the situation in this respect improved, in which a significant contribution was made both by the visit of Tzathes to Constantinople, at the court of Justin I, and Christian baptism. Usually the Byzantine emperor sent royal insignia to his vassal, the King of Lazica. Almost the entire reign of Tzathes son Goubazes II falls on the Lazic War, during which he was mostly under Byzantine influence, though he also had a period of alliance with Iran. As the historian David Braund notes, due to Iran's long reign in Iberia and the fact that Iran tried with great zeal to intervene militarily in Lazica, the alternative of an alliance with Byzantium this time was a more realistic choice for the kings of Lazica (Braundi, 2014, p. 389).

Strategic Advantages of Lazica

The difficulties of crossing the border of Lazica were a serious problem for the warring parties. The 5th-century Byzantine author Priscus notes how inaccessible Lazica was from the sea, since it did not have any ports. This moment was outlined in the middle of the 5th century, during the Lazic-Byzantine War (the war between Goubazes I and Emperor Marcian)⁴. The same thing happened in the Lazic War, when in the early 40s of the 6th century Lazica defected to the side of Sasanian Iran and opened the way for the Iranians to capture Petra and rule over Lazica; the Byzantines could not gain a foothold there until the king of Lazica, Goubazes, won over to their side gain. The Byzantines duly appreciated the help received from the local people:

“Certainly, we also needed the Colchian army, not only because the Colchians, knowing more about these places than those not knowing these places, would give us useful advice, but also because, since we would have to fight warriors seated in fortified places and heavily armed, as well as those who might come to their aid from Mukhirisi, the Colchians would also help us, fight with us” (Georgika III, 1936, p. 149) – noted the Byzantine Rusticus at the trial, on which the Byzantine commanders were tried for the murder of King Goubazes. These words were retained by Agathias Scholasticus. This section clearly shows the basic advantage of the alliance with the Lazians - their good knowledge of the area and experience of acting on their terrain.

⁴ “They were discussing which way to set out on the march: the same way, or to start a war by way of Persia's neighboring country, Armenia, and to win over the Parthian king beforehand. By sea, in their opinion, it was impossible to sail along almost impassable places, since Colchis did not have any port” (Georgika I, 1961, p. 254).

Apart from the impregnable borders of Lazica, it was also protected by strong fortresses. The important fortresses of the Lazi people and their vassals were Petra, Archaeopolis, Sarapanis, Skanda, Phasis, Rhodopolis, Uchimerion, Kotayon, Onoguris, Trachea, Sebastopolis and Pitius⁵. Most of these fortresses were former Greek colonies or Roman fortresses and often had Byzantine garrisons. All of these points were of strategic importance and were built at key points of the country.

According to Procopius, the Byzantines controlled the Caucasus passes through the Lazians: “He carefully guarded the borders of this country (the Byzantine Empire) together with his subjects so that hostile Huns would not invade the lands of the Romans, passing through Lazica from the Caucasus Mountains bordering with them (the Lazi)” (Georgika II, 1965, pp. 72-73). Attention should be drawn to one important point here, which is also noted by David Braund: The Caucasus was not as insurmountable as was often imagined. The presence of the passes in the hands of Transcaucasians could only be one of the important factors in diplomatic relations with the nomads. But that was more diplomacy than control. In case of the failure of diplomacy, the Transcaucasians had no guarantees that they would be able to repel and repulse an attack from the north (Braundi, 2014, p. 93).

As a result of examination of this issue, we can conclude that the Lazian army, using its impregnable borders, local resources and strategic positions on its territory, could effectively make short-term resistance even to powerful empires, although a long war with Byzantium and Iran was impossible for it.

Lazian Army of 5th-6th Centuries

Historical sources provide very scarce material for defining such details as: types of armies, armament, and combat tactics in the Kingdom of Lasica. Unfortunately, we do not have contemporary local sources, so even in these cases we have to rely on Byzantine authors, Procopius of Caesarea and Agathias Scholasticus.

The types of the Lazian army can be seen in the Prokopian description of the battle at Tskhenistskali (Hippis) River. The army was divided into cavalry and infantry units. “First of all, the Lazi cavalrymen drew up opposite the enemy” (Georgika II, 1965, p. 149), points out

⁵ Further to the east, Byzantium had two fortresses, both restored by Justinian: Pitius (modern Bichvinta) and Sebastopolis (near today's Sukhumi), which adjoined the coast of Abazgia (Evans, 2000, p. 92). It is also worth noting the port of Bathys Limen (Portus Altus), which was supposed to be located on the site of modern Batumi.

the Byzantine author. It seems that there were not so many of them and they were not heavily armed, since they could not dare to confront the well-armed Iranian cataphractaries - “when they suddenly met with the front enemy troops, they could not face them, they immediately turned their horses around, turned back in disorder, and rushed to the Romans to join them” (Georgika II, 1965, p. 150). The Laz infantry can also be seen in the second section: “At the end, the Lazi king Goubazes and the Roman commander Dagisthaeus followed with their infantries, with the thought that if the cavalry retreated, they could easily survive with their help” (Georgika II, 1965, p. 149).

The Byzantine and Lazi cavalry, united with the Lazi-Byzantine infantry, formed up a tight and deep rank of infantry - a phalanx against the Iranians: “The infantry, lined up in a deep phalanx, stood in front of the enemy and aimed spears at them” (Georgika II, 1965, p. 152). The military historian Hans Delbruck rightly noted that when the infantry moved in orderly tight rows, the cavalry could not destroy them, and if they were dispersed, even a weak cavalry would defeat them [Delbruck, 1996, p. 294-296]. The phalanx was mainly organized in 8 rows, which created a balance between the length of the front and the number of soldiers. During the late Roman Empire, preference was given to the 16-row phalanx. Perhaps it was considered that it was necessary to increase the depth of the phalanx due to the lack of fighting spirit in order to retain its strength. Each row was given its own task - the first four rows took part in hand-to-hand combat, so it was more heavily armed, the middle rows kept their formation and threw javelins at the enemy, and archers stood behind them. Moreover, the front ranks were also often armed with bows and arrows, and when the enemy fired an arrow from a distance, they put their spears on the ground and fired back arrows themselves. If the enemy approached, they took their spears and again formed up a defensive formation. This moment is clearly visible in the battle at Tskhenistskali: “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 Lazoi 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” (Prokopios 2014, pp. 478-479; Georgika II, 1965, p. 152).

From a fragment of the battle at Tskheniskali, we get a general outline of the Lazian army - light cavalry, infantry and archers, armed with hand-to-hand combat weapons. We also see

that the Lazians had some tactical knowledge⁶, thanks to which they formed up a phalanx together with the Byzantines and successfully fought against the Sasanians.

Agathias Scholasticus also provides important data on the Lazi Royal Guard: “Before they came to the land of their subjects, [the Lazians and the Byzantines] handed over all the governance to Varazes the Armenian and Pharsant the Colchian, who did not surpass other fighters either in bravery in battles or other virtues, on the contrary, they were even inferior to some.” One of them, Varazes, was considered Lokhagos, and the other commanded the royal detachments of the Lazi King: he was a *magistros* in position; even among these barbarians this position was called the same; but he did not have such an ingenious mind as to bravely lead the Roman army” (Georgika III, 1936, pp. 156-157). The existence of the Royal Guard and the fact that its commander could lead the Laz-Byzantine army indicates the proper strength and influence of the Royal Guard. This military unit should not have been especially plentiful, but the Guard has always been considered an elite, well-armed and politically distinct part of the society of Late Antiquity or the early Middle Ages.

We rarely meet in historical sources, but it is likely that the kings of Lazica had the opportunity, if necessary, to hire nomadic peoples, Huns and Alans living in the North Caucasus and often mentioned by Byzantine authors of the Late Antiquity period (Procopius, Agathias, Zacharias Rhetor, Priscus, etc.), and use them in battle.

Most of the Lazian army was to be a people's, raised from the free population, just as in Iberia; and a small number of noblemen made up the best armed part of it. The population of Lazica must have been much smaller compared to Iberia. This is clearly seen in the light of historical sources. Consequently, the armed forces of the Lazians were small in number and could not have much influence on the outcome of the war between the two empires, but their fighting experience in local conditions, a good knowledge of the environment gave them a considerable advantage, especially since the presence in the army of loyal Lazi guides and

⁶ We have another data about the military cunning of the Lazians. The 10th century Byzantine dictionary Suda has preserved it for us: “The Lazi, having dug pits and securely fixed spears within them, concealed the openings of the holes with frames of reeds and material that has no firm foundation but would give way to any load placed upon it; and having thrown earth on top and tilled the ground to either side and sown wheat, they put the Romans to flight” (Rance 2015, p. 852) The Byzantines seem to have crossed over the place where the Lazi set the trap, and suffered greatly. Historian Philip Rance has carefully examined this detail in his article “A Roman-Lazi War in the Suda: a fragment of Priscus?”, he compared the style of the works of late antique authors with a specific fragment of the Suda. According to Rance, from the linguistic, stylistic and historical points of view, the Lazian stratagem should have been an excerpt from the work of the fifth century author, Priscus of Panium. The original of this fragment was lost, but remained thanks to the Suda. Philip Rance also believes that this fragment describes the first unsuccessful period of the war with the Lazians during the reign of Emperor Marcian in Byzantium (450-457) (Rance, 2015, pp. 852-867).

soldiers was beneficial to both Byzantines and Iranians. Such fact as the battle at Tskhenistskali allows us to roughly imagine the average number of the main forces of the Lazi on the battlefield. It is difficult to finding real numbers in historical sources. The combined army of the Lazians and Byzantines reached 14 thousand in 550-551.

They should not have suffered heavy casualties in the destruction of 5,000 people of the Iranian commander Phabrizos (before the Battle of Tskhenistskali) because they managed to launch a surprise attack at night. Procopius notes that Goubazes and Dagisthaeus closed the Iberian-Lazian passes and left a lot of Lazi warriors to protect the territory so that the Persians could not bring food from there again or did not make an attack. Since these passes were mostly narrow and difficult to pass, large troops would not be required to protect them, and their units could be temporarily called out and joined to the main forces as soon as they received information about Chorianes march. It can be concluded that the military forces of the Byzantines and Lazi at Tskhenistskali should have been about the same number as in the resistance with Chorianes - that is, up to 13-14 thousand warriors. Based on the materials provided by Procopius, most of them were Dagisthaeus's warriors. And the Lazic army probably did not exceed 4-5 thousand people. I believe that the total military strength of the Kingdom of Lazica can be defined on average by 8-10 thousand warriors.

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