

SASANIAN WAR ELEPHANTS IN LAZIC WAR (551-556 CE)

Abstract

The Lazic War (541-562 CE) was one of the major conflicts between the Sasanian and Byzantine empires. Both armies used various tactics and strategies typical of warfare in late antiquity. Since the 4th century CE, Sasanians have started using war elephants in their military campaigns. Sasanian generals Mermeroes and Nachoragan commanded these mighty pachyderms at Archaïopolis and Phasis, during the Lazic War. The article examines the history of the Sasanian Elephant Corps, their participation in different conflicts, methods of use in battle, and the anti-elephant tactics in Late Antiquity.

Keywords: *Byzantines, Sasanians, Lazica, Elephants*

Lazic War was a prolonged conflict between the Byzantine and the Sasanian empires in the 6th century CE. The two major powers fought for dominance over the Caucasus, northern Syria, western parts of Mesopotamia, and the black sea region. Byzantine emperor Justinian launched military campaigns against the Barbarian kingdoms in the west, to reconquer the former provinces of the Roman Empire. Still, the Byzantines needed an effective defensive strategy to defend the eastern provinces from the Sasanians. After the Sasanians conquered Petra, a significant Byzantine fortress in Lazica, in 541 CE, the Byzantine Empire almost completely lost control of the major logistic lines to supply their army in Lazica. The situation changed after Byzantine general Bessas conquered and destroyed Petra in 551 CE. The Sasanians directed their military efforts to the north-western part of Lazica and besieged the fortress of Archaïopolis. According to Prokopios, a Byzantine historian of the 6th century, Mihr-Mihroe, the experienced Sasanian general who led the forces against the Byzantines in Lazica, they have had several war elephants in his army.¹ The second Byzantine author of the 6th century, Agathias, also mentions the war elephants in the Sasanian army during the Phasis siege in 555-556 CE.² These two sources are the first documented evidence of the use of war elephants on Georgian territory during the Late Antiquity. This article examines the Sasanian war elephants' presence and role in the Byzantine-Sasanian wars, their impact, ways of fighting, and the Byzantine tactics against these battle beasts.

¹ Procopius, *De Bellis VIII*, 13-14, 17. Prokopios; *Wars of Justinian*, Translated by H.B Dewing, Revised and Modernized, with an Introduction and Notes, by Anthony Kaldellis (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, Inc. 2014).

² Agathias, *Historia III*, 20, 26-27. Agathias, *The Histories*, Translated with an Introduction and Short Explanatory Notes by Joseph D. Frendo (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 1975). 90, 97-98

Elephants were used in warfare from ancient times to the modern era. Throughout history, these powerful animals were trained and carried to military campaigns to intimidate enemies and break their lines during battles.

There are two main breeds of elephants, the African and the Indian (Asian). Sasanians had the Asian Elephants, which were 2-3.5 meters tall and weighed 2 to 5 tons.³ Indian elephants were considered larger and more powerful than the African forest elephants, used in ancient times by the Carthaginians and the Ptolemaic Egypt. Female elephants were rarely used in combat, as the males were larger and with longer tusks.⁴ Asian and African elephants met at Raphia in 217 BCE where the Ptolemaic Egyptian army won the battle. Still, the larger Indian pachyderms of the Seleucids defeated their African elephants.⁵

War Elephants are often mistakenly compared to modern Tanks. A tank is an armored vehicle that can break through the field fortifications. It is also almost impenetrable for ordinary soldiers. Elephants can not be used in the same way. These animals have very sensitive nervous systems and they can be irritated easily during the battle. Richard Glower suggests, that comparing elephants to the cavalry is more accurate. "Cavalry had two values in battle, the shock of the horse's charge, which knocked men down, and the sabre with which his rider ran through the enemy who faced him or ripped up those who fell. The elephant's characteristics were similar but had a different emphasis. His shock value was far greater than the horse's; not only was he bigger, but he had weapons of his own with which he fought. He trampled the men he felled or gored them with his tusks, or he might kick, and an elephant's kick, as quick as a pony's, will send a man flying. In addition, he might bear armed riders".⁶

Sasanian Elephant Corps (Pil-Savaran) had the same role in the Iranian military as the war chariots in the Achaemenid empire. Practically, Pil-Savaran was not a one-dimensional fighting unit. At times they were placed in the rear of the army as an auxiliary force to intimidate the enemy and to raise the fighting spirit of the Sasanian infantry.⁷ According to Michael J. Decker, besides the fact that the use of war elephants could frighten the inexperienced enemy soldiers, Pil-Savaran was not as important as the heavy cavalry and the horse archers.⁸

In Antiquity, the elephant was a symbol of power and victory. In "Book of the Deeds of Ardeshir, Son of Papag", a Sasanian period Middle-Persian prose tale, Ardashir, a founder of the Sasanian empire, has a dream, in which Sasan, an ancestor of the Sasanian dynasty is mounted on a large white elephant.⁹ It was a sign of the beginning of the Sasanian

³ Konstantin Nossov, *War Elephants* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2012), 5.

⁴ William Gowers, "African Elephants and Ancient Authors", *African Affairs*, Jul. 1948, Vol. 47, No. 188 (Jul. 1948): 174-180.

⁵ William Gowers, "African Elephants and Ancient Authors", *African Affairs*, Jul., 1948, Vol. 47, No. 188 (Jul., 1948): 74-180; Nossov, *War Elephants*, 4-5.

⁶ Richard Glover, "The Elephant in Ancient War", *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (Feb., 1944): 258.

⁷ Kaveh Farrokh, *The Armies of Ancient Persia: The Sassanians* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2017), 129.

⁸ Michael J. Decker, "Methods of Warfare" in *The Byzantine Art of War* (Westholme, Yardley, 2016). Kindle edition.

⁹ Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), 121.

supremacy in Iran. This episode resembles the detail from the early Medieval Georgian historical chronicle “Life of Vakhtang Gorgasali” by Juansher Juansheriani, where King Vakhtang is mounted on a white elephant as a sign of royal power.¹⁰ According to the Late Roman historian Aelius Spartianus, emperor Hadrian’s gift to the Iberian king Pharsmanes included “an elephant and a band of fifty men, in addition to magnificent presents.”¹¹

From the 4th century CE, Sasanians revived the Achaemenid and the Hellenistic tradition of the use of elephants in warfare. “Parthians also had elephants, although their Arsacid employment in battle is unattested. Vologaeses I, riding an elephant, paraded about Caesennius Paetus’ army, which had just surrendered to him at Rhandea (62 CE), unless this detail amounts to rhetorical Roman “orientalism.”¹²

Shapur II (309-379 CE) started to use war elephants against the Romans. The Sasanians had elephants during the battles for Nisibis in 336, 346, and again in 350 CE. Romans had to deal with them during the Persian campaign of Julian the Apostate in 363 CE. In the battle of Avarayr, these powerful beasts played an important role in the major victory of the Sasanians over the Armenians. King Peroz took his elephant corps against the Hephtalites in 484 CE.¹³ Byzantines had fought against the Sasanian Pil-Savaran in the siege of Edessa (544 CE) and during the second phase of the Lazic war (from 551 to 555-56 CE). There was the largest elephant corps during the reign of Khosrow II Parviz (590, 591-628 CE). Most detailed sources about the Sasanian Pil-Savaran come from the period of the Islamic conquest of Iran (637-651 CE).¹⁴

Ammianus Marcellinus, a Roman historian of the 4th century, describes the Sasanian elephants as large, ferocious, and intimidating beasts, feared among the Romans. He also mentions that the elephant's presence on the battlefield frightened the horses.¹⁵ In the past, during the Roman Republic, legionaries faced the war elephants of Carthage, Numidia, and the Hellenistic kingdoms.¹⁶ However, starting from the 1st century, elephants almost disappeared from the battlefields until the Sasanian kings formed their Elephant Corps in the 4th century CE. Also, against the popular view, Romans themselves never adapted to the use of these powerful animals in warfare.¹⁷

According to Prokopios, Byzantines dealing with the Sasanian elephants was a major episode of the battle at Archaïopolis. “One of the elephants, because he was wounded, some say, or simply because he became excited, wheeled around out of control and reared up, throwing his riders and breaking up the ranks of the others. As a result, the barbarians began to retreat, while the Romans continued without fear to destroy those who fell in

¹⁰ Stephen H. Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature* (Routledge, London, 2017), 289.

¹¹ Aelius Spartianus, *Hadrianus (Scriptores Historiae Augustae)*, XVII. *Historia Augusta*. Volume I. With an English Translation By David Magie (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2022). 55.

¹² Paul Erdkamp, *A Companion to the Roman Army* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 261.

¹³ Hephtalites also used Indian elephants in warfare. Nossov, *War Elephants*, 38.

¹⁴ Farrokh, *The Armies of Ancient Persia: The Sassanians*, 129-134.

¹⁵ Ammianus often mentions war elephants in his work about the Roman-Sasanian wars. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XIX, 2, 7; XXIV, 6; XXV, 1, 3, 6, 7.

¹⁶ Erdkamp, *A Companion to the Roman Army*, 46, 74-75.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 218.

their way.”¹⁸ After that, the author notes that the Byzantines knew how to repel the enemy elephants, but the “result was achieved without effort on their part”.¹⁹

The second episode, where the Byzantine sources mention the Sasanian war elephants, is the battle of Phasis in 555-556 CE. The Commander of the Iranian forces, Nachoragan, brought several elephants with his army and used them to block the river against the Byzantine river fleet. After that, the elephants took part in the decisive battle at the Phasis fortress. When the Byzantines routed the Sasanian left flank, elephants stood strong on the right against the enemy attack. The powerful beasts were breaking the Byzantine infantry lines easily and their riders were shooting arrows from above, as the Sasanian cavalry attacked simultaneously. According to Agathias, “A man called Ognaris who was a member of Martin's bodyguard, finding himself trapped in a confined space from which no escape was possible took one last desperate chance — the fiercest of the elephants was charging at him and he struck it a violent blow with his spear just above the brow”.²⁰ That was a major turning point in the battle as the enraged elephants retreated, broke the Sasanian infantry lines, and frightened the horses. Nachoragan's forces fled and the Byzantines were victorious. Both episodes, described by Prokopios and the Agathias are similar in a way that defeating the enemy elephants was considered a decisive move from the Byzantines to achieve victory over the Sasanians.

Prokopios gives us an important detail that the Byzantines knew well how to repel an attack by elephants.²¹ The Byzantine and the Sasanian armies fought each other for centuries and were familiar with enemy tactics.²² Both empires tried to increase their army numbers, train them in proper ways, improve the quality of armament, and implement new tactics and strategies. Byzantines tried to learn as much as they could from the eastern enemies and the Sasanians tried to reform their military to match the well-organized and balanced Byzantine armies. To overcome the superiority of the Byzantine heavy foot soldiers, Iranians started to recruit the Daylami mountainers, skilled in infantry tactics. Sasanian dominance in heavy cavalry forced the Byzantines to improve their mounted troops. They also adapted the use of eastern mounted archery. War elephants never had a place in the Byzantine military, but the imperial army learned how to resist the attacks of the Sasanian Pil-Savaran and defeat them on the battlefield.

As stated in historical sources, the war elephants were effective when the enemy had no experience fighting against them. In some cases, the use of war elephants was counterproductive. For example, Prokopios describes how the Byzantines repelled the Sasanian elephant during the siege of Edessa in 544 CE. Romans frightened the elephant by dangling a pig from the tower. “[Pig] naturally squealed and this so irritated the elephant that he got out of control and, stepping back little by little, withdrew.”²³ It was an old stratagem used on several occasions in ancient times. According to Claudius Aelianus (II-III c. CE) and the Polyaeus (II c. CE), during the siege of Megara by the Macedonian king

¹⁸ Prokopios, *De Bellis VIII*, 14. Prokopios, *Wars of Justinian*, 494.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Agathias, *Historia III*, 26-27. Agathias, *The Histories*, 98.

²¹ Prokopios, *De Bellis VIII*, 14. Prokopios, *Wars of Justinian*, 495.

²² Michael J. Decker, “Byzantine Adaptation” in *Byzantine Art of War* (Westholme, Yardley, 2016). Kindle Edition.

²³ Prokopios, *De Bellis VIII*, 14. Prokopios, *Wars of Justinian*, 495.

Antigonus II in 266 CE, Megarans defeated the enemy elephants in the same way. They poured pitch on pigs, lit them on fire, and sent them toward the enemy.²⁴ “Antigonus order the Indians ever after, in training up their elephants, to bring up swine among them: that the beasts might thus become accustomed to the fight of them, and to their noise”.²⁵

Elephants could be irritated and enraged by thrusting their spears in sensitive areas. Frontinus describes how Hannibal’s elephants crossed the river. The Carthaginian commander “Ordered one of his men to wound the most savage elephant under the ear, and then straightway to swim across the stream and take to his heels. The Infuriated elephant, eager to pursue the author of his suffering, swam the stream, and thus set an example for the rest to make the same venture”.²⁶

At Zama in 202 BCE, the Roman light infantry played a pivotal role in Scipio’s tactics against the elephants. The infantry allowed the elephants to run through their battle line, but then the Roman foot soldiers encircled them one by one and used their javelins and spears to repel the enraged animals back to the Carthaginian lines.²⁷

The Romans were able to repel the Sasanian elephants during the eastern campaign of emperor Julian in 363 CE. His light infantry proved to be useful against the powerful pachyderms. In the same war, emperor Jovian’s soldiers killed two war elephants before the Sasanians retreated.²⁸ At the beginning of the Islamic conquest of Iran, Muslims were intimidated by the Pil-Savaran, but later they were able to defeat them. During the battle of Qadissya (636 CE), Muslims were tearing their girths to kill the riders. One of the Muslim commanders, Ghagha bin Amr, thrust his spear into the brow of an elephant, a tactic that was quickly adopted by other Arab warriors on the battlefield. Kaveh Farrokh argues that bin Amr was most likely accompanied by ex-Byzantine spearmen who knew of this tactic due to Byzantium’s past wars with the Sasanians.²⁹ It seems that this trick which was effective against the elephants, was common and not the rare exception as Agathias notes describing Onagris’s heroic fight with the Sasanian pachyderm. Agathias just tries to make the story more interesting and impressive. Conor Whitely, while discussing this episode, indicates that through employing these techniques and allusions Agathias had brought this exciting, if gruesome, episode before the eyes of his reader through the shared experience of Homer’s world.³⁰

According to Richard Glover, commanders often mistakenly used elephants during the siege battles, for example, at Archaïopolis. Elephants can not jump, so they can’t overcome

²⁴ Aelian, *On The Characteristics of Animals*. / 3, Books XII-XVII (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: W. Heinemann, 1972), 312-313. Polyænus's *Stratagems of War*. Translated by Dr. Shepherd F.R.S. (London: Printed for George Nicol, 1796), 155.

²⁵ Polyænus's *Stratagems of War*, 155.

²⁶ Frontinus, *The Stratagems; and the Aqueducts of Rome*, With an English Translation by Charles E. Bennett (London, New York, 1925), 55-56.

²⁷ Frontinus, *The Stratagems; and the Aqueducts of Rome*, With an English Translation by Charles E. Bennett (London, New York, 1925), 115-117. Adrian Goldsworthy, *The fall of Carthage: the Punic Wars 265-146 BC*. (London: Phoenix, 2009), 304.

²⁸ Decker, “Chapter IV: Clash of Empires”.

²⁹ Farrokh, *The Armies of Ancient Persia: The Sassanians*, 135-136.

³⁰ Conor Whitely, *Battles and Generals: Combat, Culture, and didacticism in Procopius' Wars* (Brill: Leiden, 2016), 162-163.

the deep trench over the fortifications. Therefore, like a tank that cannot cross a trench wider than the length of its wheelbase, an elephant was stopped by a trench if it was wider than the length of its stride and if its sides would not crumble. So too, in the ancient world, nearly every attempt to use elephants to attack an entrenched enemy seems to have been a failure, usually a disastrous failure. For, unlike the tank, an elephant is made of flesh and blood and resents becoming an animated pin cushion, and that was what he generally became on these occasions as his inaccessible foe pelted him with javelins, arrows, and every conceivable missile until in desperation he turned and bolted. A wounded, maddened elephant who got out of control and bolted back toward his own troops at once became as great a danger to them as he was intended to be to the enemy.³¹ Ammianus Marcellinus argues that “seated upon these [elephants], their drivers carried knives with handles bound to their right hands; and if the strength of the driver proved no match for the excited animal, that he might not turn upon his own people and crush masses of them to the ground. Ammianus even mentions famous Carthaginian military commander Hasdrubal, brother of Hannibal, who discovered that in that way, elephants could quickly be killed.”³²

The Sasanians achieved no success in using war elephants during the Lazic War. Both the sieges of Archaïopolis and Phasis were disastrous for them. The Byzantine authors outlined the major difficulties of using elephants in battle. They provided valuable information about the Sasanian elephant corps and the Byzantine ways of fighting against them. Prokopios mentions that the Byzantines were skilled enough to repel the Sasanian pachyderms from the battlefield. According to Agathias’ account, we can assume that the Byzantine commanders had experienced soldiers such as Martines’ bodyguard Ognaris, who had fought against the Sasanians in previous wars and knew how to deal with enemy elephants, heavy cavalry, and archers.

It seems irrational why the Sasanians would continue to use the war elephants if the Byzantines could defeat them most of the time. Elephants were a symbol of greatness and power, and they were sometimes associated with the empire. They were used in very important campaigns often led by the Sasanian kings themselves. During the siege of Nisibis (422 CE), On hearing of the shahanshah’s approach at the head of a host that included a brigade of elephant troops, the Byzantines were terror-struck and abandoned the siege.³³

In 603 CE, the Sasanian king Khosrow II Parviz started a military campaign against the Byzantine Empire to regain the territories Sasanians lost during the civil war with Bahram Chobin. Khosrow had a large contingent of war elephants, which he arranged in line and ordered his infantry to protect the animals while they moved towards the enemy. Elephant riders had the advantage of shooting the arrows from a safe and stable elevated platform. If necessary elephants could fight in close combat to break the enemy lines and intimidate their horses. With the help of his Pil Savaran, Khosrow defeated the Byzantine army, which was less experienced in elephant warfare. The same tactics were used in 451 CE at the battle of Avarayr, where the Sasanians won a decisive victory over the Armenians.³⁴ During the battle of Qadisiyyah, in which the Sasanians were defeated, their elephant corps, in

³¹ Glover, “The Elephant in Ancient War”, 262-263.

³² Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae XXV*, 1. Ammianus Marcellinus, volume II, With an English Translation by John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000). 483.

³³ Michael J. Decker, “Chapter V: The Frontiers Erupt” in *The Sasanian Empire at War*.

³⁴ Decker, “Chapter VIII: The Last Great War of Antiquity” in *The Sasanian Empire at War*.

cooperation with infantry and cavalry, fought well and even managed to flee the enemy cavalry.³⁵

Byzantine sources about the Sasanian elephants in the Lazic war show interesting details about this type of warfare in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine-Sasanian wars, giving us the possibility to compare it to other conflicts in which elephants were used. The Sasanians' failed attempt to defeat the Byzantines at Archaïopolis and Phasis indicates that the siege battles were not suitable for elephant warfare, and the Byzantines were well-organized and skilled enough to neutralize the threat coming from these large beasts. In combining with other historical sources about the Byzantine-Sasanian wars, we can see that the use of elephants had more of a symbolic meaning and they rarely were decisive in battles. It seems that elephant warfare of this era was kind of anachronistic like the scythed chariots in the Hellenistic period. For the Georgian military historiography, Prokopios' and Agathias' writings are exceptionally important since these are the first and only accounts mentioning the use of war elephants on Georgian territory.

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³⁵ Decker, "Chapter VIII: The Last Great War of Antiquity" in *The Sasanian Empire at War*. According to Al-Tabari, 10th century Muslim author, there were also elephants on which the leaders were standing and which did not fight. Al-Tabari, *The History of Al-Tabari*, Volume XII (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992), 94.

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