Nika Khoperia
Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA)

nika.khoperia.1@iliauni.edu.ge
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3076-965X
DOI:

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SEA, RIVERS, AND WATER RESOURCES IN THE LAZIC WAR (541–562 CE)

Abstract

The Lazic War (541–562 CE), fought between the Byzantine Empire and Sasanian Iran in the Kingdom of Lazica (present-day western Georgia), illustrates the central role of rivers, sea, and water resources in warfare of Late Antiquity. Western Georgia's abundance of waterways meant that armies rarely faced shortages of drinking water, even during sieges, yet these waterways shaped military strategy in decisive ways. Prokopios, Agathias, and other contemporary authors emphasize the Phasis (Rioni) river and its tributaries as both natural obstacles and vital transport routes. Fortresses were positioned along river valleys, while rivers themselves enabled the movement of troops, supplies, and even fleets. Byzantine and Sasanian armies employed various methods to cross or control rivers, from fording with cavalry and elephants to constructing pontoon bridges or artificially altering river courses to create defensible positions.

The Black Sea coastline was equally strategic. While the Sasanians initially attempted to establish a fleet, their failure after the fall of Petra left Byzantium in firm control of maritime communications. This access allowed the Byzantines to transport reinforcements and supplies by sea, ensuring the sustainability of their military presence. Conversely, the Persians relied on overland routes through Iberia, which created chronic difficulties in provisioning their forces.

Overall, the Lazic War illustrates how the natural environment—particularly rivers and the sea—can influence the course of conflict in late antiquity. Water resources served as lifelines for armies and animals, determined settlement and fortress locations, and provided key logistical and strategic advantages. In Lazica, Byzantine control of the Black Sea coast and effective use of river networks, together with their alliance with the Lazi, proved decisive in securing victory over the Sasanians.

Keywords: *Byzantine, Sasanians, Lazica, Georgia*

From a military perspective, water resources possess immense strategic value. Armies are particularly dependent on water; hence, in the strategies of opposing sides, the control of water resources and the movement of forces in or near water-rich regions assumed an important role. In studying the landscape, space, and resources of any war, it is essential to establish whether sufficient water was available for armies, horses, and pack animals, as

well as to assess the potential use of rivers or sea routes for military purposes and how this shaped strategy.

The Lazic War (541–562) between the Byzantine Empire and Sasanian Iran in the Kingdom of Lazica (present-day western Georgia) provides a particularly illustrative case. Western Georgia is interlaced with rivers, and as contemporary sources attest, armies there rarely suffered from a shortage of water—even besieged garrisons had access to it. At the same time, the water abundance of the Colchian lowlands, combined with the subtropical climate, determined the local population's lifestyle, diet, and settlement patterns.

In his *Wars*, Procopius of Caesarea emphasizes the rivers when describing the geography of Lazica, and explains how fortresses and strategic points were distributed among them:

> "But when this river reaches the limits of the Caucasus and of Iberia as well, there other waters are added to it and it becomes much larger and from there flows on bearing the name of Phasis instead of Boas; it becomes a navigable stream as far as the Black Sea into which it empties; and on either side of it there lies Lazike. Now, to the right of it, the whole country for a great distance is populated by locals as far as the boundary of Iberia. For all the villages of the Lazoi here are beyond the river, and towns have been built there in ancient times, including Archaiopolis, a very strong place, Sebastopolis, and the fortress of Pityous, as well as Skanda and Sarapanis by the boundary of Iberia. The two significant cities in the latter region are Rodopolis and Mocheresis. But to the left of the river, the limit of Lazike is one day's journey for an active traveler, and the land is devoid of people. ..."[1]

Although the rivers of Lazica were not especially difficult to cross, they required the guidance of local escorts familiar with the terrain. As Maurice's *Strategikon* advises:

> "When crossing a river or passing through some difficult country in an unfamiliar land, the advance units should move ahead. After they have reconnoitered the ground, they must report to the commander what the country is like, and competent officers should then prepare the disposition of the march".[2]

When Khosrow I Anushirvan's army first invaded Lazica, guided by Laz allies, the Lazi claimed that crossing the Phasis would be difficult and time-consuming. According to Procopius, this was merely a pretext to prevent the Persians from entering the heartland of Lazica, since the Lazi were well aware of the destruction such a large army would cause in their country.[3]

---

[1] Prokopios, Wars II, 29. Prokopios, *Wars of Justinian*, Translated by H.B Dewing, Revised and Modernized, with an Introduction and Notes, by Anthony Kaldellis (Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2014), 138.

[2] George T. Dennis, Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 21.

[3] Prokopios, Wars II, 29. Prokopios, *Wars of Justinian*, 139.

In another passage, Procopius notes that King Gubazes knew the Persians could not cross the Phasis without boats:

> "He understood that, even if the Persians had been able to cross the pass and get into Petra by forcing back the Romans on the left of the Phasis river, they could thereby inflict no injury upon the land of the Lazoi, as they had no way to cross the Phasis, especially as they had no ships. This river is as deep as any other and spreads out to a great width. Moreover, it has such a strong current that when it empties into the sea, it goes on as a separate stream for a great distance without mingling at all with the seawater. Indeed, those who navigate Lazoi have erected fortresses all along the right bank of the river so that, even when the enemy are ferried across in boats, they may not be able to disembark.".[4]

Yet other episodes reveal that the Lazic rivers were indeed fordable, even for cavalry and war elephants. Procopius recounts how the Persian general Mermeroes forded the Phasis and the Rioni, with an army of mostly cavalry and eight elephants[5]. Agathias records that the Persian commanders Mermeroes and Nachoragan both used a pontoon bridge, allowing their armies to cross the river.[6] This testifies both to Sasanian military engineering skill and to the feasibility of bridging Lazic rivers.

At times, armies even altered river courses artificially to gain an advantage. The Byzantines, for instance, diverted the Phasis (Rioni) into the Tekhuri by digging a trench, creating an artificial island for their troops to fortify.[7]

Ancient authors, such as Herodotus, Strabo, and Arrian, highlight Colchis's abundance of shipbuilding resources, including timber, wax, flax, and more. Xenophon, Strabo, and Tacitus describe navigation on the Chorokhi and Rioni. Hippocrates considered the boat the chief means of transport in Colchis.[8] Modern scholars such as David Braund confirm that Colchis produced all essential materials for shipbuilding, including sailcloth, rigging, wax, and pitch.[9]

Within Lazica, rivers such as the Khobi, Tekhuri, Fichori, Supsa, and especially the Rioni–Kvirila were used as transport routes.[10] Rivers thus acquired added strategic importance: they facilitated the movement of troops and supplies, as well as the rapid redeployment of forces along navigable waterways. The largest navigable river, the Phasis (Rioni), was deep and wide enough for significant shipping. As Procopius observes, even far out at sea, sailors could draw fresh water from its current. Byzantine sources describe fleets of triremes, transports, and smaller craft navigating the Phasis during the war.[11]

---

[4] Prokopios, Wars II, 30. Prokopios, *Wars of Justinian*, 142.

[5] Prokopios, Wars VIII, 13-14. Prokopios, *Wars of Justinian*, 490-492.

[6] Agathias II, 22; III, 20. Agathias, The Histories, Translated with an Introduction and Short Explanatory Notes by Joseph D. Frendo (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 1975), 56, 90.

[7] Agathias II, 21. The Histories, 55.

[8] Zurab Kutaleishvili, Navigation in Georgia (Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press, 1987), 15.

[9] David Braund, Georgia in Antiquity (Batumi: Batumi University Press, 2014), 78.

[10] Gela Gamqrelidze, On the military history of ancient Georgia (Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2005), 27.

[11] Agathias III, 20-21. The Histories, 90-91.

In conclusion, the main events and developments of the Lazic War demonstrate the centrality of rivers and water resources for both belligerents. Military operations consistently unfolded in river valleys, especially along the Tskhenistskali and Rioni. Rivers supplied water for troops, horses, and livestock, enabled transportation and provisioning, and occasionally hosted small-scale naval engagements. Control of the Black Sea coast was equally crucial: while the Sasanians attempted to establish a fleet early in the war, they failed after the Byzantines captured Petra and effectively abandoned maritime ambitions. The Byzantines maintained full control of the coast, using it to project power and move forces. Importantly, neither side appears to have suffered shortages of drinking water, given western Georgia's abundance of springs and groundwater; even during sieges, cutting off water was virtually impossible, as the failed Persian blockade of Petra illustrates. Food supply, however, posed a greater challenge, especially for the Persians, who had to transport provisions over the Caucasian passes from Iberia. Ultimately, Byzantine alliances with the Lazi, combined with access to the Black Sea coastline and river network, and the ability to maintain secure supply lines, proved decisive in defeating the Sasanians in Lazica.

Bibliography

1. Agathias. *The Histories*.Translated with an Introduction and Short Explanatory Notes by Joseph D. Frendo. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 1975.
2. Braund, David. *Georgia in Antiquity*. Batumi: Batumi University Press, 2014.
3. Gamkrelidze Gela. *On the military history of ancient Georgia* (in Georgian). Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2005.
4. Dennis, George T. *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
5. Prokopios. *Wars of Justinian*. Translated by H.B Dewing, Revised and Modernized, with an Introduction and Notes, by Anthony Kaldellis. Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2014.
6. Kutaleishvili, Zurab. *Navigation in Georgia* (in Georgian). Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press, 1987.