

Tedo Dundua, Emil Avdaliani

Georgia (Colchis/Lazica and Iberia) within the Imperial Defense-Systems:

Roman and Early Byzantine Cases

Introduction

There are two ways to prove Georgia's place within the NATO Alliance. First is the current argument urging for total Euro-Atlantic unity, next – historical one. Previous pan-European (Roman and Early Byzantine) military presence in Georgia can be applied to the present discussion. The article covers this issue.

Roman Period. Frankish Limitanei in Lazica

Before being totally destroyed, Imperial security system actually had shown three gradual phases of development.

Huge number of the Italian colonists with the best technologies, swift and comfortable communications, the most prominent industrial output, Roman citizenship, municipal freedom – that was the Roman gift for the Western provinces in the 1st-2nd cc. A.D. Sincere intimacy with the metropolis had been founded as a direct result of complete satisfaction. It paved the way to the Romanization. As for the Greeks, the Romans reserved a quite life and economic stability. Still beyond the Roman Rhine, Danube and Pontus there were others favouring to this concept of pan-European integration. The happy client kings used to be awarded with the Roman citizenship. And for the Julio-Claudians these client kingdoms formed the first defense-line of the Imperial territories. A little behind, the whole perimeter had been dotted by solid

legionary concentrations, proving the system to be impregnable. No cardinal changes took place in the era of the Antonines, except of annexation of the client kingdoms and breaking the big concentrations in favour of scattering the legions along the whole frontier. In the both cases, after defeating comparatively weak enemy at the border, the Romans usually attacked their territory. This system of security is called forward defense.

Greeks and the Romans were sending more and more hands towards industry, but not to manufacture the means of production. As a result, population was growing, but not amount of industrial goods *per capita*. Prices rushed high for the Italian produce, demanding damping for provincial food and raw materials, thus weakening the sympathies between the European subjects of the Roman Empire. Some even started to search for a relief beyond Rhine and Danube. Many things had happened that completely changed the defensive strategy, namely: 1. economic crisis, 2. weakening of the integratory links, 3. socio-economic animation of “*Barbaricum*”, 4. financial chaos and some professional regiments converted into *limitanei*. From now they are to stand the first strike and evacuate the whole frontier folk into citadels, thus wearing down the enemy. And there were large and mobile field armies deployed far behind that self-contained strongholds to cut down any invasion into the depth. This system shaped in the times of Diocletian is called defense-in-depth.

But before this new system was finally established, the Romans had been fighting those already easily passing the border wherever they could manage to concentrate large army-units. In the early days of Empire praetorians formed the only Imperial reserve. And now Gallienus recruited special mobile reserve-regiments. Name for the defensive system is elastic defense.

Security system had to be changed at least because of emergence of the Germanic seaborne attacks from the 3rd c. everywhere at the seas that prolonged the line of the frontier.¹

Full-time units, legions, *alae* of cavalry, *cohortes* of infantry and mixed *cohortes equitatae* served the forward defense-system. Part-time border force of *limitanei* had appeared and auxiliary *alae* and cohorts had disappeared; and regular mobile reserve – *comitatenses* – substituted legions, fixed at the border.

¹ Ed. N. Luttwak. The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire. From the First Century A.D. to the Third. Baltimore. 1981, pp. 192-193; T. Dundua, N. Silagadze. European Industrial Complexes of I Cycle of Capitalism and the Georgian Western Affiliations. Historical and Numismatic Tale. Tbilisi. 2005, pp. 5-7; T. Dundua. North and South. Tbilisi. 2001, pp. 8-15.

All they served new security system – defense-in-depth. The whole 3rd c. saw these changes, finally shaped in the times of Constantine I. Septimius Severus was the first to form a certain kind of reserve. He stationed II *Parthica* in Albanum, increased praetorian and urban cohorts in number. And Gallienus created special cavalry units to serve as a reserve.²

In the 3rd c. large federations of *Franki* and *Alemanni* began to threaten the Rhine-frontier. And the Goths had already reached Dniester by 238.³ Franks attacked Gaul, Alemanns – Italy. From the great deeds of Emperor M. Aurelius Probus (276-282) the most important is the deliverance of seventy Gaulic cities. He drove back Franks and Alemanns, four hundred thousand of them being killed. Probus passed the Rhine, and returned back with considerable tribute of corn, cattle, and horses. Sixteen thousand Germanic recruits were dispersed among the Roman units. Other captive or fugitive barbarians gained a new status, that of part-time peasant-soldiers (*limitanei*). Emperor transported a considerable body of Vandals into Cambridgeshire, great number of Franks and *Gepidae* were settled on the banks of the Danube and the Rhine, *Bastarnae* – in Thrace. Pontic (The Black Sea) coast was reserved for some more Franks.⁴ But which one exactly? This is to be discussed.

According to Ed. Gibbon, Franks settled at the sea-coast of Pontus had to check the Alani inroads. A fleet stationed in one of the harbors of the Euxine fell into their hands, and they resolved, through unknown seas, to explore their way from the mouth of Phasis (river Rioni in West Georgia) to that of the Rhine. They easily escaped through the Bosphorus and the Hellespont, and cruising along the Mediterranean, indulged their appetite for revenge and plunder by frequent descents on the shores of Asia, Greece and Africa. City of Syracuse was sacked by the barbarians. Franks proceeded to the columns of Hercules, coasted round Spain and Gaul, and steering their course through the British channel, at length finished their voyage by landing in safety on the Batavian or Frisian shores.⁵

What is this whole story based on? Zosimus and one panegyric to Constantius Chlorus contributed to it.

Narrating about the events in the past, in the times of divine Probus, author of this panegyric mentions undeserved success of the small Frankish

² Ed. N. Luttwak. *The Grand Strategy*, pp. 173, 184.

³ Ed. N. Luttwak. *The Grand Strategy*, pp. 128, 146.

⁴ Ed. Gibbon. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Vol. 1. London. 1993 (first published in 1776), pp. 362-368.

⁵ Ed. Gibbon. *The Decline and Fall . . .*, pp. 367-368.

band, who, sailing from Pontus on the captured fleet, ravished Greece and Asia, damaged Africa, stormed Syracuse, and passing through the columns of the Hercules, reached the ocean (*Recursabat quippe in animos illa sub diuo Probo paucorum ex Francis captiuorum incredibilis audacia et indigna felicitas, qui a Ponto usque correptis nauibus Graeciam Asiamque populati nec impune plerisque Libyae litoribus appulsi ipsas postremo naualibus quondam uictoriis nobiles ceperant Syracusas et immenso itinere peruecti oceanum, qua terras irrumpit, intrauerant atque ita euentu temeritatis ostenderant nihil esse clausum piraticae desperationi, quo nauigiis pateret accessus.*)⁶

Zosimus tells us about the Franks having applied to the Emperor, and having a country given to them. A part of them afterwards revolted, and having collected a great number of ships, disturbed all Greece; from whence they proceeded into Sicily, to Syracuse, which they attacked, and killed many people there. At length they arrived in Africa, whence though they were repulsed by a body of men from Carthage, yet they returned home without any great loss.⁷

There is no mention of mouth of the river of Phasis as a spring-board for the expedition in the sources. Then, what was in Gibbon's mind? Perhaps, logics, excluding the possibilities.

Indeed, the Northern Black Sea coast is beyond the Roman rule. The Western shores, and the Balkans are already packed with the barbarians. Southern littoral had been less used for *receptio*. While Lazica (West Georgia) and Pontic *Limes* cannot be argued. And something strange had happened to this *limes* in the 3rd c. Now threat comes not from the front, the Romans have Lazi client king dwelling there, but – from behind, because of the Goths living at the Northern shores.

We can only guess that the Franks were in Lazica as *limitanei*. But we really know nothing about how they were coordinating with the full-time units, their number before and after the revolt, what was the life like for those who stayed loyal.

Still, it seems quite reasonable that the bargain of *receptio*-system should had been distributed among all Roman provinces to keep the centre undisturbed from the barbaric influx. In the 3rd c. Empire is able to do this, not after.

⁶ Panegyricus Constantio Dictus, IV, XVIII. Panegyriques Latins. T. I (I-V). Texte Établi et Traduit par Édourd Galletier. Paris. 1949, pp. 96-97.

⁷ Zosimus. New History. Book 1. London. 1814.

Byzantines in Georgia

With the death of Theodosius, last Emperor of the united Roman world, in 395 A.D. the Empire was divided into two almost same-sized halves. The Western part, while defending itself throughout the 5th c. from various barbarian hordes⁸ coming from beyond the Rhine river, had an almost destroyed tax-paying system. This very factor did not allow the Imperial administration based in Ravenna to muster enough economic and military resources for effective defense of the Northern borders. Last Western Roman Emperors were mere puppets in the hands of barbarian warlords – the process which culminated in deposing the last Emperor Romulus Augustulus in 476.

The Eastern part (Byzantium) with the capital in Constantinople, on the other hand, showed greater resilience in managing internal problems and external threats. Byzantium managed simultaneously to hold off the barbarians coming from the North and the Sassanians from the East. This was made possible by an efficient tax-paying system the Byzantines inherited from the Romans, which, in turn, made it possible to field large armies to defend the Imperial borders on several fronts and at the same time wage offensive wars.⁹

The Byzantines had not had such abundant resources as the Romans had during the first three centuries A.D. Moreover, the Eastern half was spread on three continents – Europe, Asia and Africa – making the Imperial borders highly vulnerable to foreign powers. In other words, the geography put the Byzantine Empire at a huge disadvantage as the Danube river was a barrier easy to cross for the Goths, or in later centuries Huns, Slavs and Avars. In Africa, the desert frontier stretching for more than a thousand kilometers had no geographic barrier to rely on making rich Tripolitania and Byzacena and the South of Egypt exposed to attacks from the Berbers and other nomadic groups. The Eastern frontier too was highly vulnerable as the Arab groupings could easily reach Palestine and Syrian cities from the Syro-Mesopotamian desert. In the North Mesopotamia Byzantium faced its greatest rival, Sassanian Iran, and this portion too needed to be defended with the assemblage of large military power, whether through the field armies or military fortifications. Moreover, the Byzantines had little geographic depth along its entire Eastern frontier to fully employ the

⁸ At the time, the Western part was defended by regiments consisting mainly of barbarians.

⁹ Ed. N. Luttwak. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*. Harvard. 2009, pp. 1-16. The most apparent case is the reign of Justinian when, while waging war on Vandals in North Africa and the Ostrogoths in Italy, Constantinople still had to defend its Eastern border from the Sassanians and the Danube river from the Slavs.

defense-in-depth strategy.¹⁰ The similar situation was in Africa. Since Asia Minor, Balkans, Egypt and Syria were the most prosperous lands in terms of population number and the level of urbanization, the functioning of the Empire was contingent upon the defense of these provinces. Overall, the Byzantines were at much worse geographic situation than their Western counterparts.

Thus, in order to survive in this difficult geopolitical situation and preserve the Empire from early 5th c. to the 7th c., the Byzantines had to develop a whole set of military strategies. In other words, the Byzantines were no less successful than the Flavians, Antonines and late 3rd c. Emperors. However, the Byzantines made numerous changes by adapting to new circumstances. Since Constantinople had less economic and human resources than the united Roman Empire, the Byzantines always tried to use less military power and employ more diplomacy and the propagation of the Christian religion¹¹ to safeguard Imperial borders.

The Byzantines inherited from the Romans military presence in Lazica and alliance with Kartli/Iberia (East and South Georgia). This military tradition goes back to the first two centuries A.D. and represents a forward-defense strategy. Byzantine garrisons, which existed in Lazica from the 5th c. till the Arab invasion of the Middle East in the 30s of the 7th c.,¹² did not change their location. However, the role of Lazica considerably increased as in late 4th c. the so-called **“Völkerwanderung” or Migration period began**. Since the new peoples such as Huns, Avars etc. lived in the Eurasian steppes, which bordered the Caucasian range and the Danube river, Constantinople had to face a two-front war from the North (from the Eastern and Western parts of the Black Sea). Therefore, the Byzantine garrisons in Lazica were transformed into forward posts for collecting information about new peoples coming from the steppes and, in case of need, establishing first diplomatic contacts too.

For example, when approximately in 557 the Avars reached the Volga river, in modern-day Southern Russia, in a year or two through the Alans they

¹⁰ For example, in the Balkans Constantinople did enjoy large geographic depth necessary for the defense. This was apparent when the Huns under Attila and then the Avars in early 7th c. broke through the Danubian defenses and reached Constantinople. However, military regiments placed in various fortresses and the distance of several hundreds of kilometers (from the Danube to the capital) enabled the Emperor, whether it was Theodosius II or Heraclius, to thwart the barbarian onslaughts.

¹¹ G. Fowden. *Consequences of the Monotheism in Late Antiquity*. Princeton. 1993, pp. 80-100.

¹² T. Dundua. *Influx of Roman Coins in Georgia. Roman Coins Outside the Empire. Ways and Phases, Contexts and Functions*. Proceedings of ESF/SCH Exploratory Workshop. Nieborow (Poland). 2005. Moneta. Wetteren. 2008, p. 313.

sent an embassy to Constantinople. But, before the letter was received in the capital, first it had been passed through the hands of Byzantine generals stationed in Lazica.¹³ The role of Lazica increased also because of the mountain passes through which the newly-coming nomads from the North could potentially penetrate into the South and cause havoc even in the Eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire as it happened in 395 when the Huns reached as far as Antioch!¹⁴ The Byzantine officials also used the passes to distract nomad leaders by making them to take much longer roads to reach the Imperial capital. Menander Protector preserves the bitter complaint of a Turkic chief from the steppes, North to the Caucasian range, dated by 577:

“As for you Romans, why do you take my envoys through the Caucasus to Byzantium, alleging that there is no other route for them to travel? You do this so that I might be deterred from attacking the Roman Empire by the difficult terrain (i.e. high mountains which for horses are very hard to cross). But I know very well where the river Danapris (Dniepr) flows, and the Istros (Danube) and the Hebrus (Maritsa, Meric)”.¹⁵

Lazica’s military importance increased even more following the stand-off between Justinian and the Sassanian Shahanshah Khusro I Anushirvan in mid-6th c. By the time Iran had already been increasing its political and military pressure towards North and West, which culminated in the abolition of the Albanian and Armenian kingdoms during the 5th-early-6th cc. As was said, mid-6th c. saw renewed warfare between the empires and the focus of the conflict, traditionally along with the North Mesopotamia, also fell on Lazica. Iran was interested in occupying the Eastern Black Sea coast to pressure Constantinople (which by the time was already embroiled in a war with the Ostrogoths in Italy) into signing a more winning peace treaty for Ctesiphon. The Byzantines knew well that if the Sassanians managed to occupy the Lazica shore, Iranian military vessels in the near future would make their way through the Bosphorus directly

¹³ Ed. N. Luttwak. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 59.

¹⁴ P. Heather. *The Fall of the Roman Empire. A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. Oxford. 2007, pp. 145-154.

¹⁵ *Excerpta de Legationibus Romanorum ad Gentes*, 14, in *The History of Menander the Guardsman*. Translated by R. C. Blockley. London. 1985, p. 175.

to Constantinople. This is well reflected in one of the passages from Procopius – Lazi sent an embassy to Khusro to explain the geopolitical advantages which the Iranians would gain through controlling Lazica and the Byzantine fortresses there:

“To the realm of Persia you will add a most ancient kingdom, and as a result of this you will have the power of your sway extended, and it will come about that you will have a part in the sea of the Romans through our land, and after thou hast built ships in this sea (i.e. Black Sea), O King, it be possible for thee with no trouble to set foot in the palace in Byzantium. For there is no obstacle between. And one might add that the plundering of the land of the Romans every year by the barbarians along the boundary will be under your control. For surely you also are acquainted with the fact that up till now the land of the Lazi has been a bulwark against the Caucasus Mountains (De Bello Persico. II. 15)”.¹⁶

The above analysis of the Roman and Early Byzantine military strategies towards their neighbors quite clearly shows that Georgia always had its own place within the pan-European military alliances. Why not bring it back?

¹⁶ Procopius of Caesarea. History of the Wars. Translated by H. B. Dewing. Cambridge. Massachusetts. 1914, pp. 225-226.