

Marcin Wieczorek

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

War at the Eastern Border of Late Ancient Lazica According to *De Bellis* of Procopius of Caesarea. Several Questions

The Lazian-Iberian border in late antiquity was one of the most important land borders in the eastern part of the ancient Mediterranean world. Formally, it separated two states: Lazica on the western part and Iberia on the eastern side. However, the Likhi Range, the natural barrier between these two states, was the border of much more extensive systems. Here the field of interests of the Roman Empire and Persia, each with its spheres of influence and aspirations, eventually collided. In this respect, the significance of the Lazian-Iberian border went beyond the local geopolitical situation but was part of the long-standing and essentially unresolvable Roman-Persian conflict. How important this place was is shown by the truce signed between Justinian and Chosroes, whereof excluded the Transcaucasian area. That is means, the defence of this place was important both for the Laz and, even more, for the Romans and Persians. Especially as the Caucasus itself was a very strategic place.

Procopius of Caesarea, whose *De Bellis* also describes the fighting in the Caucasus, has left us with a fairly detailed description of the fortifications in the borderlands, especially from a Roman perspective.¹ Moreover, he also

¹ I have used several issues of works of Procopius of Caesarea: Polish translation: Prokopiusz z Cezarei. Historia wojen. t. I. tr. D. Brodka. Kraków. 2013; Prokopiusz z Cezarei. Historia wojen. t. II. tr. D. Brodka. Kraków. 2015. The Greek original: Procopius. t. I. Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae. 43. B. G. Niebuhr (red.). Bonnae. 1833; Procopius. t. II. Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae. 44. B. G. Niebuhr (red.). Bonnae. 1833; for De aedificiis: Polish translation: Prokopiusz z Cezarei. O budowlach. tr. P. Ł. Głowacki. Warszawa. 2006; The Greek original: Procopius. t. III. Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae. 45. B. G. Niebuhr (red.). Bonnae. 1838.

described the natural conditions in Western Colchis-Lazica, which is also significant for getting a full picture of its strategic values. Despite this, it would seem that his work rather depicts the ease with which the Persians entered Lazica during the second offensive in 541 AD,² occupying its eastern borderlands essentially without a fight. On the other hand, although with considerable success in the first phase of the fighting, the Persians encounter resistance in the next phase, so it cannot be entirely concluded that the Lazian defensive system failed. Whether this system was effective in the 6th century and how it was organised will be the subject of this article. In the course of the issues described, I will also try to raise some research directions that need to be developed. I want to as well as to show that the frontier was not only perfectly fortified but that the fortress complexes formed a compact defensive system.

Procopius' account of the frontier is founded on two conflicts. The first of these was, according to the chronicler, driven by a religious issue. In Iberia, which despite its dependence on Persia is a Christian country, Zoroastrianism was going to be an official religion, by order of the shah Khosrow I. The intention met with strong resistance from the Iberians, who, led by their king Gourgenes, asked emperor Justin for help. Justin agreed to this proposal but did not initially send Roman troops to defend Iberia, instead of attempting, through Probus' envoy to Bosphorus, to recruit Hun troops there. Procopius writes that this plan failed and the emperor subsequently sent a Hun troop under the command of Peter to help Iberians.³ However, the help came too late, as the Persians managed to enter Iberia at this time, forcing Gourgenes and his court to flee to Lazica.⁴ As David Braund points out, the issue of the Christian religion was what most strongly formed alliances in the Caucasus area.⁵ At the same time, belonging to the Christian religion, and thus to the orbit of influence of Byzantine culture and strong links with it, aroused a certain suspicion of the Ctesiphon. Although it happened that in Persia Christians reached a high position in the administration, the Zoroastrian priests were rather hostile to Christianity and the loyalty of Christian subjects was questioned. Especially as

² Every date in this article refers to Christian Era.

³ This must be another Hun's troop, who was under the Roman command earlier. About Peter's career: J. R. Martindale. Petrus 27. [in:] J. R. Martindale. The Prosopography of the Roman Empire. vol. II A.D. 395-527. Cambridge – London – New York – New Rochelle – Melbourne – Sydney. 1980, p. 870.

⁴ Proc. Bell. I.12.6-9.

⁵ D. Braund. A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia, 550 B.C.-A.D. 562. Oxford. 1994, p. 281.

it tied them to Persia's strongest adversary⁶. Suspicions were not without reason. In the eyes of the Roman emperor, the adoption of Christianity by the ruler of a foreign country meant to accept the religious (and therefore also political) authority of the emperor. And the emperor, in turn, was obliged to care for the salvation of his subjects.⁷ This could easily have sufficed as a *casus belli*. On the other hand, Gourgenes' attitude is part of a tradition of resistance to Zoroastrianism⁸. Significantly, although the Iberian elites had left Iberia, the Persians, according to Procopius, were unable to reach them in Lazica because 'they had natural conditions against them in a difficult terrain'.⁹ After this, as Procopius suggests because of the request of the Iberians, a contingent of Roman troops under Irenaeus arrived in Lazica.¹⁰ However, they did not enter Iberia. This situation was taken advantage of to consolidate the Roman military presence in Lazica. Particularly, it seems (although Procopius did not name them) in the fortresses of Sarapanis and Skandis.¹¹ These fortresses were previously guarded by local forces, which had been dismissed and replaced later by imperial troops. Poor food conditions on the site were the reason the Roman soldiers abandoned the positions. When the Romans left their fortresses, they were taken over by the Persians. The Romans, stopping at Lazica, did not do that to help Gourgenes return to Iberia and fight the Persians there, but most probably, as later events showed, to secure the Roman sphere of influence against Persian encroachment. It was therefore a break of the agreement Justin had given to the Iberians.

The question of frontier fortifications must have been a very confrontational issue. In efforts to obtain peace between the empires, the emperor Justinian also sought to recover them, which finally happened in 532,¹² despite some initial difficulties. This situation is described *post factum* in *Novella 28* of the *Codex Justinianus*, stating in the introduction:

Post quos etiam nostra consistit Lazica, in qua et Petraeorum est civitas, a nobis

⁶ Op.cit., p. 282.

⁷ M. J. Leszka i T. Wolińska, *Cesarz, dwór i poddani, [in:] Konstantynopol – Nowy Rzym. Miasto i ludzie w okresie wczesnobizantyjskim*. Warszawa. 2011, p. 241.

⁸ See for example uprising of Vakhtang Gorgosali, the martyrdom of St. Shushanik or Eustathius of Mtskheta: D. Braund. *A History of Colchis...*, p. 284.

⁹ Proc. Bell. I.12.13.

¹⁰ Proc. Bell. I.12.14. J. R. Martindale. *Ireneus* 7, p. 626.

¹¹ These forts are indicated by their location right at the entrance to Iberia, Proc. Bell. I.12.15; D. Braund. *A History of Colchis...*, p. 283.

¹² Proc. Bell. I.22.1-19.

civitas esse et nominari percipiens et utens nostrae pietatis cognomine et Iustiniana vocata, et Archaeopolis et Rodopolis, castra maxima et antiqua. Inter quae sunt et ea quae a nobis ex Persis capta sunt castra, Skandis et Sarapanis et Muriseus et Loriseus et si quod aliorum nobis in Lazis est laboratum.¹³

Skandis and Sarapanis together with Muriseus and Loriseus located on the frontier perfectly match the fortresses described by Procopius as left by the Romans.¹⁴ The Persians control over these forts is also mentioned by Menander the Protector, referring to an envoy from Peter.¹⁵ Interestingly, despite their strategic location, these were a danger to both the Persians in Iberia and the Romans in Lazica. For this reason, when they returned to the possession of the Laz (and thus indirectly to the Romans), they were demolished, to avoid a situation when the enemy will control them again, although later, during another Persian invasion, the army of Mermeroes rebuilt Skandis,¹⁶ and later also Sapanis.¹⁷ Similarly, the Laz demolished Rhodopolis as a place too easy to occupy and led the defence against the Persians from Archeopolis.¹⁸ As it seems, Sarapanis was a more important fortress and was situated on a significant trade route.¹⁹ *Kartlis Tskhovreba* attributes its construction to Parnavaz.²⁰

Due to the fact the Persians were more successful in battle and quickly broke through to Lazica, Procopius writes more about the Lazian fortifications than Iberian. Noteworthy is the strategy of the Laz, which can be described as a scorched-earth strategy in the scope of fortifications. The Laz demolished the already mentioned Skandis and Sarapanis for fear of being recaptured by the Persians, and a similar fate befell Rhodopolis as well.²¹ This tactic seems not to have been new among the Laz, as Kotais may have been demolished even earlier.²² To better understand the Lazian-Iberian borderland, it is worth mentioning the fortress of Ouchimereos, supposedly located near Kotais. This

¹³ Corpus iuris civilis. t. III: Novellae. ed. R. Schoell. Berolini. 1895, p. 212 and after.

¹⁴ Procopius counted them several times as frontier fortifications: Proc. Bell. I.12.15; I.29.18.

¹⁵ The History of Menander the Guardsman. tr. R. C. Bockley. Liverpool. 1985, fr. 61. lines 545-550, pp. 84-85.

¹⁶ Proc. Bell. II.13.20.

¹⁷ Proc. Bell. II.16.17.

¹⁸ Proc. Bell. II.13.15-26.

¹⁹ D. Braund. A History of Colchis..., p. 288.

²⁰ Kartlis Tskhovreba. A History of Georgia. ed. S. Jones. Tbilisi. 2014, p. 24, lines. 14-15

²¹ Proc. Bell. VIII.13.22.

²² Proc. Bell. VIII.14.47.

fortress had been occupied by the Laz and Romans, but because the Persians control the land of Mocheresis and rebuilt Kotais provisionally, they lost access from rest part of Lazica that remained under Roman rule. That means, there was not possible to supply soldiers. Mocheresis region, on the other hand, was a strategically important plain located right at the foot of the Likhi Range on the Lazica side. As Procopius himself writes, it was the most fertile land of Lazica and an important supply route to Suania and Skymia.²³

As I have already mentioned, Sarapanis and Skandis were to be abandoned by the Romans officially due to supply difficulties. If the identification of Sarapanis with the modern village of Shorapani is correct, then the problem of feeding the fortress should not be as great as Procopius claims.²⁴ The fortifications are located on a hill above the mouth of the Dzirula to the Qvirila, but there are plains all around, while the river was navigable²⁵ and a tunnel reached it directly from the fortress²⁶. In the same way, the removal of the Laz from the fortress, which had later consequences, seems meaningless. D. Braund indicates that it may have been due to uncertainty about the loyalty of the Laz, although the only thing that indicates this is the abrupt replacement of them by Romans.²⁷ It may also have been a matter of disbelief in the Laz's ability to defend these strongholds, although how quickly the Romans withdrew and what pretext indicates that suggest there were other possibilities. Perhaps the real reason involved the diplomatic tension between Byzantium and Persia. After all, when control of the frontier was taken, the Romans officially gave guarantees to Gourgenes that they would protect Iberia from Persian rule. The presence of a Roman army so close to Persian territory may have caused Persian anxiety. The presence of a Roman garrison in the city of Dara was of similar

²³ Proc. Bell. VIII.14.45-47; 53-54. To more geographical details see: D. Braund and T. Sinclair, Map 87 Phontus-Phasis with Introduction [in:] Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World. R. J. A. Talbert (ed.). Princeton. 2000, p. 1226-1242; Map 88 Caucasia with Introduction, D. Braund [in:] op. cit, pp. 1255 – 1267.

²⁴ Proc. Bell. I.12.14 – 19.

²⁵ Strabo. Geo. XI.2.17. The Geography of Strabo. v. 5. tr. H. Jones. London. 1961.

²⁶ Braund. A History of Colchis..., p. 288; D. Braund. Procopius on the Economy of Lazica. "The Classical Quarterly" New Series. vol. 41. no. 1. (1991), pp. 223-224; A. Vinogradov. Some Notes on the Topography of Eastern Pontos Euxeinos in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium. "Higher School of Economics Research Papers", no. WP BRP 82/Hum/2014, p. 13; N. Murghulia. FaRiG Project: The Fortification system of Lazika (Egrisi) kingdom in the 4th – 6th centuries (Research into West Georgian Castles). Final report. Tbilisi. 2010, p. 58.

²⁷ D. Braund. A History of Colchis..., p. 288.

concern.²⁸ Nevertheless, it seems that the Romans did some work at Skandis and Sarapanis.²⁹

The Likhi Range thus form a fortified barrier, but it seems that the Romans relied much more on the difficult terrain for some reason than on fortifications. The Persian invasion certainly did not come as a surprise, however, despite the existence of well-fortified frontier strongholds, their defence was abandoned. For such an important border, efforts to protect it are negligible, and the withdrawal of Roman troops from Sarapanis and Skandis is meaningless.

Dislocating defence deep into Lazica is surprising especially when Laz had previously been successfully stationed on the border, probably as early as the time of Strabo.³⁰ What was behind such tactics, and was it necessary for the Romans to retreat so far into Lazica before any attempt at defence was made at all? Procopius' explanation that this was done for fear of the Persians using the fortresses certainly has some merit. If we consider that Lazica was attached to the Pontic province in *Novella 28*, we can see how important this land was from the point of view of Constantinople. On the other hand, however, Justinian was not hastening to go to war with Persia at a time when he was engaged in wars in the western Mediterranean. Although Laz were removed from the defence of Sarapanis and Skandis, they returned later anyway after regaining their strongholds in 532 only to destroy them. D. Braund's idea that this could have been due to doubts about the loyalty of the subjects has some validity. But why did such doubts occur just after Gourgenes of Iberia had only just been admitted to Lazica? Perhaps the new dominance of Romans on Lazica was not so welcome. Two things suggest it. Firstly, when Justin had sent Roman troops to Lazica he ordered them to stay there despite Laz will. And secondly, during the Roman rule, there is a dissatisfaction of the population with the presence of Roman troops, as Procopius tells us.³¹ Perhaps Laz had not agreed with this

²⁸ Proc. Bell. I.10.13 – 19; I.16.6-8.

²⁹ I. Mania, N. Natsvlishvili. Littoral fortifications in South-West Georgia, [in:] K. Flora, (ed.). Medieval ports in North Aegean and the Black Sea: links to the maritime routes of the East; International Symposium. Thessalonike, 4-6 December 2013. Proceedings. Thessalonike. 2013, p. 280; V. Pishchulina, A. Argun. The spatial Byzantium culture in the North-East Black Sea coastal area fortification architecture. IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering. vol. 698, No 3. 2019, p. 3 (online version); N. Murghulia. FaRiG Project: The Fortification system..., p. 58.

³⁰ D. Braund. A History of Colchis..., p. 288.

³¹ Proc. Bell. I.15.10-13; VIII.16.3.

domination even before 525, despite words of Procopius that is never happened before,³² and later dissatisfaction was rising. Perhaps D. Braund is right when he states that Lazica could have fed the Laz, but not the Roman army,³³ so that during the presence of the Roman army Lazica's economic decline. The second clue is the lack of fighting ability of the Laz from the Roman perspective. Although there is no indication of this in 525, already during the war in 40s the Laz troops escaped from the battlefield. The Laz under the command of their king, Goubazes fled at the sight of the enemy.³⁴ Procopius later writes that the Roman commanders lost confidence in the Laz troops because of this.³⁵ Although these events took place in 549 there is no indication that some lack of trust was not already present among the Romans earlier. The Romans indeed agreed to let the Laz enter the battle first, but it must be noted that they were not left to decide the battle themselves. The Romans were marching in the second line. Because of this, perhaps it was not at all uncertainty about the loyalty of the Laz that caused the Romans to take the fortresses at Sarapanis and Skandis, but a lack of confidence that they could defend these places. In this light, it seems somewhat more logical why these fortresses were demolished to the ground. The Roman army could no longer be stationed there because more soldiers were needed on the western fronts and Justinian want not to provoke Chosroes to war. In turn, the Laz demolished these fortresses not because they feared that the Persians would seize them again, but because the Romans feared of it. A similar tactic was present also in the Roman army, so that's even more possible the Romans ordered to destroy these forts.³⁶ It is also worth noting that this was done to all frontier fortresses that were not manned at least in part with a Roman crew, as at Ouchimereos. It seems, therefore, that the Romans, by annexing the whole of Lazica more firmly into their orbit of influence, tried in some way to minimise or exclude the indigenous population from the defence of their territory. This can be used to explain the sudden removal of the Laz from their frontier, even though the Romans were certainly aware that their military presence so close to Persia's borders would be perceived by Persia as a potential danger. The idea that there was some crisis in Roman-Lazian relations here has support in Procopius' account, although the mass passage of the Laz to the

³² Proc. Bell. I.15.12.

³³ D. Braund. *Procopius on the Economy...*, p. 224.

³⁴ Despite they were having previously fear that the Romans would do so: Proc. Bell. VIII.8.3-20.

³⁵ Proc. Bell. VIII.8.29

³⁶ Proc. Bell. VIII.4.5-6.

Persian side, seems to have taken place only after the withdrawal of the Laz from Sarapanis and Skandis.

The fortresses at Sarapanis and Skandis are important forts defending access from Lazica through the passes. However, the central point of the defensive system was probably the fortress at Rhodopolis. Nikoloz Murghulia distinguishes three functions of the fortresses in the Lazyki area: control of the passes, communication (e.g. through light or smoke signals), and administrative-command functions.³⁷ In the case of the region under consideration, one can easily see that Skandis and Sarapanis are fortresses of the first type, while Rhodopolis seems to be an administrative centre, as Murghulia already notes.³⁸ Within the system there are also fortresses at Kotais and Ouchimereos (location unknown, perhaps it is modern Motsamed)³⁹. The defence system is greatly developed and Procopius devotes much space to it. Especially to the description of the Mocheresis region. This region, as the most fertile, was not only to feed the inhabitants of Lazica but also to allow access to Suania and Skymia, two vassal regions of Lazica.⁴⁰ As soon as the Persians gained power over Mocheresis, these regions came under their rule, as is also evidenced by Peter's message delivered by Menander the Protector.⁴¹ Thus one can see how power over Mocheresis was important. Mocheresis itself was not, of course, the only land in Lazica capable of feeding its inhabitants. The entire valley of the Phasis River was suitable for cultivation, except for its lower reaches, where there were to be marshes. However, this was also a strategic point from which it was easy to launch an offensive on other parts of Lazica. The defensive structure of this region is interesting. Procopius mentions several fortresses within the eastern part of Lazica: Kotais, Rhodopolis, Sarapanis, Skandis and Ouchimereos. Rhodopolis as we know it was already located on the plain, at the confluence of Phasis and modern Khanistskali River and as a fortress centrally located about to the others, it had to perform an administrative

³⁷ N. Murghulia. FaRiG Project: The Fortification system..., p. 91.

³⁸ Op. cit.

³⁹ A. Vinogradov. Some Notes on the Topography..., p. 13. Citing: ო. ლანჩავა, ნ. ქარციძე. უქიმერიონი – ციხე-ქალაქი წყალწითელა. ქუთაისის ისტორიული მუზეუმის შრომები. ტ. XIX. 2009 (online access 05.11.2021). Localizing also as Uktimerioni Hill in Kutaisi (e.g. R. H. Hewsen. The Geography of Ananias of Širak (AŠXARHAC'OYC'): The Long and the Short Recensions. Wiesbaden. 1992, p. 127, n. 13).

⁴⁰ Proc. Bell. VIII.14.46-48.

⁴¹ Despite Shah had not been very interested to gain these mountainous regions to his domain: Menander, fr. 6.1. lines 492 – 514, pp. 81-83.

function and a command centre, Sarapanis and Skandis defended the passes providing access to Lazica. Kotais defended the road from the north through the Phasis valley. Ouchimereos, on the other hand, according to Procopius, was located near Kotais and was a powerful fortress.⁴² It also defended access to Suania and Skymia, because as soon as it was sneakily taken over by the Persians, the Persians gained full control of the area.⁴³ There are two other fortresses mentioned in other sources: Mocherisis (named that same as the region) and Lozorion. Procopius did mention the fortress of Mocherisis in *De bellis*, but laconically, calling it the most important city in Lazica, next to Rhodopolis.⁴⁴ Lozorion, on the other hand, appears in another work, Procopius' *De aedificiis*, as a place that was erected on the orders of Justinian.⁴⁵ Both, in turn, appear in the already mentioned *Novella 28* under the names Muriseus and Loriseus.⁴⁶ As Procopius is sometimes mistaken when describing the situation in Lazica, it seems that Mocherisis may have named the most important city a little too much, since, as we know from later sources (which each name the place slightly differently⁴⁷), no significant military action took place at this fortress. Moreover, its location is still a matter of debate.⁴⁸ Similarly in the case of Lozorion. The functions of Mocherisis and Lozorion then remain unknown, but some hypotheses can be drawn. According to Procopius, Justinian ordered the fortification of the passes, but this probably did not mean the construction of new fortifications but the expansion of existing ones. Under this enigmatic

⁴² Proc. Bell. VIII.14.51-54.

⁴³ Proc. Bell. VIII.16.4-15.

⁴⁴ Proc. Bell., II.29. 19.

⁴⁵ Proc. Aed., III.7.5.

⁴⁶ Corpus iuris civilis. t. III. Novellae. ed. R. Schoell, p. 212.

⁴⁷ Procopius: Μοχόρησις (Proc. Bell. II.29.16-19; VIII.14.45-54); Agathias: Μουχερισις (Agath. Hist. II.19.1; II.22.3; III.6.1-3; III.6.9-10; III.7.1-2; III.19.5; III.15.1; III.28.6-10; IV.13.5; IV.9.7); Novella 28: Muriseus (pref.); Letter of Anastasius Apocrisiarius to Theodosius of Gangra: Μουκουρισις (§4, Ep. Anastasii Apocrisarii ad Theodosium Gangrensem, [in:] P. Allen & B. Neil. Maximus the Confessor and His Companions Documents from Exile. Oxford. 2002, pp. 132-148). Other sources like Notitia Dignitatum (Mochora, Dux Armeniae chapter) and Claudius Ptolemy's Geographia (Μεγλῆσσος) are uncertain.

⁴⁸ K. Kekelidze while discussing localizations of Moucourisis from letter of Anastasius Apocrisiarius give after Dubois de Montpéreux information that pointing Geguti as the most probably localisation: კ. კეკელიძე. ეტიუდები ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორიიდან. ტ. VII. თბ. 1961, გვ. 29; F. F. Dubois de Montpéreux. Voyage autour du caucase chez les Tcherkesses et les Abkhases en Colchide en Géorgie en Arménie et en Crimée. t. II. Paris. 1839, p. 112; ო. ლანჩავა. ქუთაისის არქეოლოგია. ქუთაისი. 2015, გვ. 223; გ. გამყრელიძე. პროკოპი კესარიელის და აგათაის ოხზულებებში მოხსენიებული „მუხირისის“ შესახებ. კოლხოლოგიური ნარკვევები. II. თბ. 2001, გვ. 129.

statement in *De aedificiis*, he is most probably referring to the expansion of Sarapanis and Skandis, which took place at that time. The same Rhodopolis, which, although demolished by the Laz, soon, according to Agathias, came back under Roman rule and to its former shape.⁴⁹ Just as Procopius suggests, but also *Novella 28*, it was such an important place that it had to be rebuilt, even though it was easier to conquer than other, mountainous, fortresses. Perhaps, the fortresses of Lozorion and Mocheresis should be understood as subsidiary fortresses. We see that Kotais is located as a fortress, and there was supposed to be a second one nearby. If in fact, Ouchimereos was at Motsamedia, very close to modern Kutaisi, then perhaps they should be understood as a single defensive complex: Kotais at the mouth of the pass already on the Colchis side of the plain, and Ouchimereos at its inlet on the Suanian side. Perhaps Mocheresis and Lozorion should be understood similarly. In *Novella 28* they are mentioned together, as if in contrast to Skandis and Sarapanis. Perhaps they too were separate, semi-independent defensive systems. If Skandis and Sarapanis were on the eastern side of the Likhi Range, then perhaps Lozorion and Mocheresis were on the western side. However, more research is needed to determine this exactly.

The Iberian-Lazian border had its best foothold in the natural limits, which were the Likhi Range. The inaccessible terrain significantly impeded access to the Lazica from the east, while the most vulnerable places to attack, river gorges and mountain passes, were protected by strong fortifications. The border areas on the Lazica side additionally had many other fortifications, which together formed a defensive system quite difficult to force through.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the advantages of having such a system were not exploited in the 6th century, especially during the second Persian invasion. The fact that the first invasion stopped at the frontier is mainly an indication that the mountains were difficult to cross and the Persians were unprepared. If fortifications had played any major role in the battle, Procopius would most likely have mentioned it. The lack of information about this may indirectly suggest that the fortresses may be poorly defended by the Laz. The Romans, therefore, distrusted the Laz (whether through their lack of loyalty, their nascent dissatisfaction with the Roman presence, or their disbelief in their fighting ability), and as a result, they were removed from the defence of the key fortresses at Skandis and especially

⁴⁹ Agat. Hist. IV.15.1. Agathias. The Histories. tr. Joseph D. Frendo. Berlin – New York. 1975.

⁵⁰ ი. ლანჩავა. ქუთაისის არქეოლოგია, გვ. 145.

Sarapanis, and replaced by their army. When these left their post after a short time, and the fortresses were taken over by the Persians. They now became a threat. This is probably why the Romans wanted them back so strongly. When this happened as a result of the agreement of 532, the fortresses were not reoccupied by either the Romans or the Laz, but only demolished (which presumably meant that the fortifications were so damaged that they could not fulfil their function, as Agathias' account of Rhodopolis suggests). Rhodopolis and Kotais, essentially the core of the country's defences, suffered a similar fate. This surprising abandonment of these forts and the shifting of the defences deep into the country may have been due precisely to the fact that the Romans did not allow the Laz themselves to defend the frontier (it should be noted that Ouchimereos did not share the fate of the other forts, because Romans served there together with the Laz), and Roman soldiers were simply too few to be stationed everywhere. One should also pay attention to the diplomatic aspect of the presence of Roman troops so close to the border. As the example of Dara has shown, stationing an army right next to a Persian state was considered confrontational. Open conflict was something, that the Romans may have preferred to avoid. There may also have been some kind of agreement whereby the Romans undertook to demolish Sarapanis and Skandis, and perhaps this is a situation analogous to the case of Dara, which was eventually not demolished. Supply difficulties may also have played a role, but probably not as Procopius describes, but rather Lazica itself was unable to feed the entire Roman army present in its territory.⁵¹ By the time Chosroes' army reached Lazica, it was simply too late to send Roman troops there.

The relegation of defences from the Likhi Range made it more difficult for the Laz and Romans to fight, although they eventually succeeded in pushing the Persians out of Lazica. We also see that the Persians, deprived of the impediment of fortresses, overcame the mountains without much difficulty, occupying all of Mocheresis without a fight. They thus gained a considerable advantage both strategically and in terms of supplies, and cut off the Romans from possible support from the Suans. The whole war for Lazica, therefore, shows how important the defence of the Likhi Range was and that maintaining them was strategic for both the Romans and the Persians, as they were the gateway to control of one or the other country. This is why such an elaborate defence system, consisting of many elements, was used in the land of

⁵¹ D. Braund. *Procopius on the Economy...*, p. 224.

Mocheresis. For the same reason, the Romans consolidated their rule over Lazica as soon as the political opportunity arose, since it was control over the whole territory, up to the mountains, that gave the Empire greater control over the security of the Black Sea coast and thus the maintenance of its sphere of influence. Given this, the abandonment of their defence is all the more surprising. But, as I have already mentioned, this could have been due to the Empire's involvement in the fighting in the West, and due to avoiding war on the East.