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REINFORCING EASTERN LIMES: FORTIFICATIONS OF LAZICA IN THE AGE OF JUSTINIAN I

In the Late Antique period, a developed military defence system was formed in West Georgia. It consisted of fortifications constructed both along the Black Sea coast and inland by Romans and their vassals, the rulers of the kingdom of Lazica. Roman littoral strongholds built from the first to the third century AD included three large fortresses – those of Pitunt, Sebastopolis, and Apsaros. They were of particular importance since they provided the control and protection of maritime routes. On the other hand, hinterland was safeguarded by large fortified cities such as Archaeopolis, the Capital of Lazica, and Rhodopolis and by smaller forts of Scandis and Sarapanis.

During the Byzantine-Persian wars, Lazica became a battlefield of two clashing Empires and its forts served as the key to the domination of the region. They were under the close attention of the opposing sides because of their location on the routes connecting Anatolia with Lazica and further with Iberia and Armenia. For Byzantines these strongpoints played a crucial role in the retention of conquered territories. In the age of Justinian I, Byzantines changed fortification pattern by adding new buildings such as Petra, Losorion, and presumably Mochiris (slide 1).

Fortifications of Lazica are listed in Justinian's Novella 28, which states: „Lazica is ours, in which is also the city of the Petraeans, which has taken its civic identity and title from us, using the name of our piety and being called Iustiniana. There lie also Archaeopolis and Rhodopolis, very large and ancient forts. With these are also the forts of Scandis and Sarapanis, which we took from the Persians, and Mourisius and Lysiris and whatever other works we have performed among the Lazi" (slide 2). As witnessed by these words, Justinian's self-confidence was largely based on the control of the strongholds of the region.

Petra – a city with a strong citadel and enclosing defensive wall was the most important fortified city built by Byzantines in West Georgia. Apparently, Petra was a small Roman fort before it became a Justinian's stronghold (slide 3). The Byzantines

reconstructed it in the 530s and themselves destroyed it in 551, being afraid the Persians would seize it. It seems that destruction of fortifications during the war was common practice in Lazica. The same was done to Rhodopolis, Pityus and Sebastopolis. As soon as Byzantine forces felt the threat of losing the fortresses to the Persians, they razed them to the ground.

Judging from the Procopius' information and archaeological evidence, the work done in Petra by the Byzantines must have included the expansion and reinforcement of the old citadel and the construction of an outer wall circuit. They also built a number of structures in the fortress. Though the identification of the Justinianic work is inhibited by the poor state of the preservation and extensive alterations of the fortress under the Ottomans, a complex study of narrative sources, archaeological data and architectural peculiarities makes it possible to credit Justinian's army with the construction works in Petra.

The remains of the fortress are located on two coastal hills near the modern village of Tsikhisdziri (slide 4). The citadel is situated on the northern hill, which is larger than the southern one, on which a tower stands. The citadel and the tower were connected by a long double-wall - presumably, a *proteichisma* (outwork) (slide 5). It was a common feature of the sixth-century fortresses in some countries, e. g. in Bulgaria. The idea of the wall consolidated with vaulted pylons was inspired by the wall of Constantinople built in the reign of Theodosius II (408-450). In West Georgia, the same feature is seen in the several fortresses.

The citadel occupies a large territory reaching approximately 200 m in length and 100 m in width. Extant remains contain northern, eastern and southern walls, as well as some ruins in the western part of the inner fortress. The main entrance to the citadel revealed by archaeological excavations was made in the wall connecting the northern and southern hills and was flanked by two small rectangular towers. The curtains had two gates and were reinforced by four towers, which differ from each other in their shape and design (slide 6).

Apart from the fortification walls and towers, the citadel was equipped with a bath-building composed of five different functional sections arranged in enfilade, a cistern, and a water supply system that guaranteed water delivery during a long siege (slide 7). There was also a church, a three-nave basilica with a narthex, projecting apse, and mosaic floor (slide 8). All these structures should have been built in the age of Justinian.

Another fortification built by Justinian was Losorion in the vicinity of the present-day Batumi (slide 9). Also mentioned by Procopius, Losorion was identified with the Medieval fortress of Batumi, located at the northern entrance of the city. Unlike other Georgian Medieval fortresses, it is rectangular in plan and does not follow the shape of the hill, which might be caused by the fact that it was built over a castellum. Indeed, archaeological excavations revealed the remains of an old citadel dating back to the early Byzantine period.

The actual ruins of the fortress, built of coarsely hewn blocks, occupy an area of around 20 m × 20 m. There is a small two-storied tower in its north-eastern corner. In the south-eastern and south-western corners, the wall forms rectangular projections that are entirely open to the rear (slide 10). This feature is typical of the early Byzantine fortifications.

Another castellum, which is also supposed to be constructed by Justinian, is Mochiris (slide 11). It has recently been identified with Geguti Castle, the summer residence of Medieval Georgian kings. The fortress, built of hewn blocks of stone (slide 12), stands on the flatland along the river Rioni and occupies an area of around 43 m × 41 m. Its curtains are reinforced with projecting circular towers in the corners and with semicircular ones in the middle of each wall except for northern wall where the main gate was made (slide 13). It is flanked with two U-shaped smaller towers, which are standard in the early Byzantine fortifications. In the 12th century, Georgian kings reused the convenient, compact plan of the fortress and turned it into an impressive domed structure.

Byzantines also restored or repaired several fortresses built earlier by Romans or by the Lazi themselves – the old *castrum* Apsaros, Archaeopolis, Rhodopolis, and Sarapanis.

Apsaros was perhaps the most important Roman stronghold in the region. The exact date of its foundation is unknown (slide 14). It was first mentioned by Pliny, but it may have existed – perhaps as a wooden fort – already in the first century BC. By 132 AD, when Arrian visited Apsaros, it was a large castrum in which were stationed five cohorts, making it an exceptionally large garrison. Tabula Peutingeriana (slide 15) shows Apsaros with a schematic sketch of a fortress – an emphasis that was not given to other littoral fortifications of the region.

Apsaros should have been a typical castrum, with *via principalis* and *via praetoria* running athwart each other and a central square at their intersection (slide 16).

Archaeological excavations revealed a praetorium, barracks, bathhouses, water cistern, system of sewerage and water supply, all from the Roman period.

Archaeological investigation showed that the Apsaros fortress was deserted from the latter half of the fourth century. Local rulers did not use the fortress after its abandon by the Roman garrison. Most probably the revival of Apsaros and restoration of its fortress started in the mid-sixth century. According to Agathias, briefly after 555, the murderers of the king of Lazica Gubazes II were imprisoned in the city of Apsarunt. In the early Byzantine period, the fortress was actively used, which is confirmed by archaeological discoveries. Byzantine structures inside the wall circuit were built over the foundations of Roman buildings.

It is difficult to distinguish early Byzantine walling within the Roman masonry since the restorers extensively reused stones from the destroyed parts of the original fortress (slide 17); this makes the general picture of the masonry extremely difficult to untangle. It seems that the Byzantines not only reused large blocks but also dressed stones in the same manner themselves. It is not surprising as for the construction they engaged local work force, which followed centuries-old building tradition.

The fortress is distinguished by its large scale and for the quality of its masonry. It has an impressive wall-circuit of 5 m in height, totally built of stone. Square, rectangular, and U-shape towers are built at intervals along the walls and at the corners of the circuit. Apparently, there were 22 towers before the Medieval reconstruction. In all probability, the original fortress, founded in the first or second century AD did not have towers. These towers would be unlikely to be present in the early years of the Roman occupation; the appearance of the fortress with its projecting towers is better suited to later times. The problem is that both the rectangular and U-shaped towers may equally well have been added in late Roman times as in the early Byzantine. However, still one can assume that rectangular towers (including the best preserved north-western corner bastion) were built in the fourth century. Their masonry is largely bonded with that of the curtains and thus they should have been made at the same time. As regards four U-shaped towers of the southern wall (including the south-western corner bastion), most likely they appeared in the sixth century. The fortress was the most vulnerable from the south and it seems that the southern wall underwent significant damage in the late Roman period. Apparently the Byzantines restored it extensively, reusing the previous large blocks, and changed the original rectangular form of the four projecting towers into U-shaped. It is high

probable that several new towers were also added to the older fortification as it usually took place during the reign of Justinian I.

As a part of the Byzantine plan to reorganise defence system, repairs were made to the older fortified cities of Archaeopolis and Rodopolis as well. Located in Inner Lazica they are described as “very large and ancient forts” in Justinian’s Novella 28. Indeed, Archaeopolis as a late antique fortified city finds no parallels in the Caucasus in terms of its scale and urban infrastructure (slide 18). Stretching along 20 hectares of uneven and varied terrain, it served as the capital of the kingdom of Lazica from the 4th to the 8th centuries AD. Archaeopolis played a decisive role for the maintenance of control over the region. It consisted of a lower town and an upper citadel connected with a defence wall to each other (slide 19). The lower town occupied a plain terrace on the bank of the river. Its enclosure reinforced with rectangular towers provided protected place for living or temporary shelter. The slope was usually intended for the garrison. Fortified citadel is located on a high hill plateau.

Byzantines involvement in repairing and building at Archaeopolis is quite impressive. They not only reinforced already existed enclosure and made it double-walled from east and south, but also constructed and restored several churches (slide 20). Walls of the fortification are fully built of roughly cut stones. In the angles, better-dressed blocks also can be seen. The same building technique was used in the fortifications of Sarapanis, Skanda, Rodopolis, and Petra all occupied and renovated by the Byzantines in the age of Justinian (slide 21).

Building technique of these fortifications was affected by local building tradition shaped by the availability of stone. As evidenced by the remains of the fortifications, local stone, either in large blocks or in rubblework, was used as a major construction material for them. Byzantine mixed brick and stone masonry technique *opus mixstum* occurs seldom. Masonry with alternating stone and brick courses can be found in the enclosure of Rhodopolis and Sarapanis (slide 22). Builders of the Byzantine period applied brick for arches and vaults as well. Archaeological evidence proves that brick used in construction was made locally. Use of *opus mixtum* with large limestone blocks in Lazica confirms that local masons were aware of the construction techniques of the Roman world.

The architecture of the fortresses of the south-western Georgian reflected different stages in the development of Late Antique fortification architecture (slide 23). The

Romans usually used a standard plan, the simple rectangular outline of which was suited to flatland. Apsaros and Mochiris are typical examples of this kind of fortresses, however Losorion built on the top of the hill is also based on the regular geometry of the castellum plan, ignoring uneven landscape. Local people who had strong building traditions owed much to the Roman concept of fortification, but were more flexible in their planning. Byzantines, who within the eastern frontiers reinforcement program rebuilt and reused strongholds of Lazica also valued local building tradition. Builders usually tried to derive benefit from natural defence and used planning approach that implies the compliance with a landscape. This approach can be seen in Nokalakevi and Petra, where irregular contour of fortresses follow the hills. Where necessary they used additional means of defence such as a moat in case of Rhodopolis (slide 24). Despite the moat and reinforced eastern wall Rhodopolis was still vulnerable due to its location standing on the plain surface at the main military road from Iberia to Lazica.

The scale of the building activities conducted by Byzantines in West Georgia confirms the significance of the region in general and its fortifications in particular for Justinian.