

## PROCOPIUS ON THE ECONOMY OF LAZICA

Procopius states that the Colchian Lazi had neither salt nor grain nor any other good thing; for this reason they always engaged in trade with the Romans around the Black Sea:

ἐφύλασσαν δὲ οὔτε αὐτοὶ χρήματα ἢ στρατιὰν πρὸς Ῥωμαίων δεχόμενοι οὔτε Ῥωμαίοις πη  
 ξυστρατεύοντες, ἐπ' ἐμπορίᾳ δὲ τῇ κατὰ θάλασσαν πρὸς Ῥωμαίους αἰεὶ τοὺς ἐν πόντῳ  
 ὠκνημένους ἐργαζόμενοι. αὐτοὶ μὲν γὰρ οὔτε ἄλας οὔτε σίτον οὔτε ἄλλο τι ἀγαθὸν ἔχουσι,  
 δέρρεις δὲ καὶ βύρσας καὶ ἀνδράποδα παρεχόμενοι τὰ σφίσιν ἐπιτήδεια ἐκομίζοντο.  
 (Wars 2.15.5; cf. 2.15.10–11)<sup>1</sup>

The same idea is re-stated in slightly different form elsewhere in Procopius, where the Lazi are said not to have had wine either.<sup>2</sup> Procopius implies that the Lazi were so bereft of produce that they relied on trade with the Byzantine Black Sea in order to obtain necessities. The standard treatments of the Byzantine empire duly reproduce Procopius' assessment, with varying degrees of caution.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Procopius' assessment of the economy of Lazica is unusually negative. Throughout antiquity, Lazica had been seen as a land rich in raw materials and agrarian produce, not only grain and wine, but also timber, linen, semi-precious gems, metal-work and more besides.<sup>4</sup> The only negative assessment of its resources that might support Procopius is that of the Hippocratic *Airs, Waters and Places*, but that text may itself be skewed by its need to prove a broad theory of climatic determinism, both in the eastern Black Sea and elsewhere. In any event that treatise seems concerned not with all Lazica, but only with the wetland Phasiani.<sup>5</sup> The rest of the literary tradition contradicts Procopius and is positive, sometimes glowing, about the economy of Lazica. Indeed, the fullest praise of the resources of Lazica is broadly contemporary with Procopius' negative assessment: on the Lazi, Agathias observes,

I certainly know of no other subject race with such ample resources of manpower at its command or which is blessed with such a superfluity of wealth, with such an ideal geographical position, with such an abundance of all the necessities of life and with such a high standard of civilisation and refinement. The ancient inhabitants of the place were indeed completely unaware of the benefits of navigation and had not even heard of ships until the arrival of the famous Argo. Nowadays they put out to sea whenever practicable and carry on a thriving commerce. Nor are they barbarians in any other respect, long association with the Romans having led them to adopt a civilised and law-abiding style of life.

(Agathias 3.5.2–4, transl. J. D. Frendo)

Procopius' assessment is evidently problematic. However, it is also quite specific,

<sup>1</sup> The translation of δέρις is uncertain: according to Eupolis fr. 357 (Kassel–Austin), it is part of a woman's clothing. *Etym. magnum* regards it as a thick cloak (*himation*) or skin (*derma*) or something spread at doorways (curtain or mat?). Menander Protector fr 6.1 line 569 (Blockley) uses the word for what are probably fleeces, received by the Lazi from the Suani of the pastoral highlands above Lazica. <sup>2</sup> Wars 2.28.27–9.

<sup>3</sup> Typical is K. Hannestad, 'Les relations de Byzance avec la Transcaucasie et l'Asie centrale aux 5e et 6e siècles', *Byzantion* 25–7 (1955–7), 421–56, esp. p. 449. Among the more cautious is J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* (London, 1923), ii.100, who observes that this country (*sc.* Lazica) seems to have been then far poorer than it is today. E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* (Paris, 1949), ii.303 follows Bury very closely.

<sup>4</sup> Hdt. 2.104; Memnon (=FGH 434) 238a; Strabo 11, p. 498; Agathias 3.5.1ff.; cf. B. C. McGing, *The Foreign Policy of Mithridates VI Eupator, King of Pontus* (Leiden, 1986), p. 60. Procopius himself, as an exception to his general strictures, observes the fertility of part of the Lazian hinterland: Wars 8.14.46. On the modern situation, see J. Stadelbauer, *Studien zur Agrargeographie Transkaukasiens* (Berlin, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Ps.-Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places* 15.

for he mentions the import of salt, grain and wine. An examination of the role of each of these three commodities in the Lazian economy helps us gauge the accuracy of Procopius' remarks.

First, salt. Salt had been imported into Colchis at least as long as wheat (see below). Moreover, it seems to have been a major factor in diplomatic relationships within the region, between the coastal strip and the more mountainous hinterland, where salt-sources are notably lacking. Large quantities of salt could easily be brought from the Crimea and its area. Salt was of great importance, particularly in food-preservation, and was imported in quantity and traded around Transcaucasia, not only in antiquity but through the Middle Ages and down to quite modern times. Salt-imports were needed in Lazica. On this much, Procopius is entirely correct.<sup>6</sup>

Second, grain. Procopius' word *sitos* can have a more specific meaning, denoting, for example, wheat, but it usually has a broader meaning than that, including many forms of non-meat food, even legumes. There was no lack of grain in Lazica, nor lack of legumes. However, the most commonly eaten grain there was not wheat, but millet, as Procopius knew. The millet was probably prepared as a sort of polenta, as in later centuries: this dish, called *gomi*, remains one of the pillars of the cuisine of the region, though it is now made from maize.<sup>7</sup>

It has been suspected that wheat was imported into Lazica from early classical times at least, supplementing some local wheat and other grains: some wheat came to Lazica from the hinterland, grown in the foothills of the Caucasus. In any event, millet was available and Byzantine imports of grain seem not to have been vital. The Lazi seem to have had a wide taste: when Byzantine forces ransacked Lazian homes near Phasis, they found both millet and other grain there.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, wine. Lazica has always produced wines of reasonable quality, but it has always imported foreign wines as luxury items. No doubt wine was imported into Lazica in the sixth century A.D., as it had been in the sixth century B.C., but its import was not a necessity.<sup>9</sup> Of the three imported goods which Procopius specifically mentions, only one – salt – might be considered a necessity. Despite Procopius' claims, it seems that the trade of wine and wheat into Lazica was not vital to the Lazi.

Yet Procopius is right in so far as there was indeed substantial trade into Lazica, as Agathias and archaeology confirm: imported amphorae are abundant in this period. Some of these amphorae seem to originate in the eastern Mediterranean near Antioch and are thought to have contained olive oil.<sup>10</sup> Olive trees do not grow in

<sup>6</sup> See Strabo 11, p. 506 with D. C. Braund and G. R. Tsatskhelidze, 'The Export of Slaves from Colchis', *CQ* 39 (1989), 116 and, at length, D. C. Braund, 'Dio Chrysostom, Olbian Trade and Olbia's Tauroscythian War', *Arkheologiya* (Kiev) 1991 (forthcoming). On salt in Colchis in late prehistory, see D. C. Braund, 'Textile Ware from the Eastern Shore of the Black Sea', *Archaeological Textiles Newsletter* 9 (1989), 5–6.

<sup>7</sup> *Wars* 1.12.17. Menander the Guardsman indicates that the Lazi sent grain to the Suani each year and suggests that this grain was crucial to the Byzantine allegiance of the Suani: the type and source of this grain remain unclear: see fr. 6.1, lines 254–5 (Blockley). Moreover, the context of this information is a debate on the status of the Suani, so that some caution is required. The matter is made still more unclear by a later passage in Menander which has been taken to contradict his earlier account and to show that the Lazi received honey and wool in tribute from the Suani: fr. 6.1, lines 568–9 (Blockley).

<sup>8</sup> G. A. Lordkipanidze, *K istorii drevnei Kolkhidi* (Tbilisi, 1970), pp. 47–50. The Persians imported wheat flour for their forces in Lazica, but, crucially, their supply-route was overland and therefore more difficult than Byzantine supply by sea: Procopius, *Wars* 2.3.30ff., esp. 46; cf. Agathias 4.30.7. On stores in Lazian houses, see Agathias 2.21.2.

<sup>9</sup> Lordkipanidze, op. cit. (n. 8), pp. 52–3.

<sup>10</sup> See C. Abadie-Reynal, 'Céramique et commerce dans le bassin égéen du IV<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle', in G. Dagron (ed.), *Hommes et richesses dans l'empire byzantin*, i (Paris, 1989),

Lazica, so that importation of oil is likely enough, particularly to supply Byzantine forces there. However, for the Lazi, the importation of goods from the west was not a matter of basic survival, as Procopius seems to imply, but (with the exception of the trade in salt) a trade in luxuries. The distinction is crucial.

Procopius makes much of what he takes to be Lazian dependence on Byzantine imports. On his interpretation, Byzantine attempts crudely to control this trade through the establishment of a monopoly at Petra under Justinian led to Lazian defection from Byzantium and alliance with Persia in 540–1.<sup>11</sup> John Tzibus is held responsible for this crude control. However, Procopius' analysis of events loses much of its force once we see that Byzantine control imposed restrictions on goods which were (with the exception of salt) luxury items. It is likely enough that such control was an irritant factor in Byzantine relations with the Lazi, but it seems not to have been the life-and-death issue that Procopius presents.

Moreover, Procopius' analysis is also susceptible to criticism on other grounds. His attack on Tzibus is something of a Procopian topos. Peter is said to have behaved badly in Lazica; so too Bessas, who, according to Procopius, was obsessed with the exaction of taxes. In short, 'the Lazi are motivated by bad experiences under individual Byzantine officers whom Procopius happens to dislike'.<sup>12</sup> Even the internal logic of his story of Tzibus' impropriety and its effects is not particularly cogent. He proceeds to relate how Lazian defection to Persia did nothing to improve the economic plight of Lazica: through this defection, Lazian trade with the Byzantine empire was made still more difficult, so that the Lazi, in an even worse economic plight than before, sought to return, in circular fashion, to the fold of Byzantium.<sup>13</sup>

Procopius' negative assessment of the Lazian economy accorded with an analysis of the Lazian defection which placed much blame on Tzibus, with whose faults Procopius was much concerned. Yet, Procopius' misconception of the Lazian economy is more than a function of his attitude towards certain individuals.

At one point,<sup>14</sup> Procopius even talks of the Persians bringing timber into Lazica from Iberia in order to build ships. The notion is all but absurd given the abundance of ship-building timber and other ship-building materials in Lazica, as repeated by all our other sources. Procopius mentions the supposed import as part of an obscurely complex plot by the Persians against the Lazian king: this bogus tale of timber-import is part of a larger narrative, which is itself open to doubt, not least because the timber is said to have been reduced to a heap of ashes by a timely bolt of lightning.

Nor is this the only such example. In his account of Byzantine difficulties in holding Sarapanis, a fort which governed the marchlands between Lazica and Iberia to the east, Procopius substantially exaggerates the difficulties of supplying the garrison there.<sup>15</sup> He claims that no food at all grows there, except a little millet: this is simply

pp. 143–59 with the following: on Archaeopolis, P. P. Zakaraya (ed.), *Nokalakevi-Arkeopolisi*, i–ii (Tbilisi, 1981–7): in Georgian with brief summaries in Russian and English; on Petra, N. Inaishvili, 'Late Antique Baths at Tsikhisdziri', *Samkhret-dasavlet sakartvelos dzegebi* (Batumi) 17 (1988), 76–85: in Georgian with brief Russian summary; on Rhodopolis, V. Japaridze, *Vardtsikhis nakalakari* (Tbilisi, 1989): in Georgian with Russian and brief English summary; on Phasis, G. Gamkrelidze, 'Underwater Archaeology around Poti', *Matsne* 1987.1, pp. 97–117: in Georgian, with illustrations.

<sup>11</sup> *Wars* 2.28.27–8.

<sup>12</sup> Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London, 1985), p. 122; cf. *Wars* 2.15.6; 8.13.10–12.

<sup>13</sup> *Wars* 28.27–8. The whole account leads one to suspect that other factors were at work – Procopius hints at the disaffection caused by the quartering of troops among the Lazi: *Wars* 2.15.12.

<sup>14</sup> *Wars* 2.29.1.

<sup>15</sup> *Wars* 8.13.15–16; he includes Scanda, as at *Wars* 1.12.15ff., so that there might be some justice in the remarks, but Scanda has yet to be securely identified and, as a neighbour of

false, for Sarapanis (modern Shorapani) lies in good agricultural land. Procopius also claims that it was very difficult to bring supplies there from further afield. But that is a considerable exaggeration: Strabo, for example, states that Sarapanis lay at the limit of river transport, but not beyond it.<sup>16</sup> However, despite the existence of a river network which facilitated supply lines, Procopius stresses that all goods had to be taken to Sarapanis on shoulders: he omits all mention of riverine transport.

Here again, as with Tzibus at Petra and the story of timber-import, Procopius' misconception of the Lazian economy is interwoven with the interpretation of his broader narrative: if transport was very difficult, then the failings of the Lazi become understandable and perhaps even excusable: the Byzantine garrison was supplied with goods transported by the Lazi, who, we are told, were not prepared to sustain the burden, so that, as a direct result of the difficulties of supply, Sarapanis was abandoned by the Byzantine forces. The whole explanation depends upon difficulty of supply involving substantial portage: once those difficulties are seen to be exaggerated, the whole explanation becomes suspect. We are left to consider the cause of Procopius' low opinion of the economy of Lazica.

It may be that Procopius was misled by the vital need for substantial shipments of goods to Lazica not for the Lazi so much as for the Byzantine army, as at Sarapanis. For all its resources, Lazica was certainly a land which could not feed the large Byzantine forces which operated there: even the positive Agathias gives some indication of the problems of feeding those forces.<sup>17</sup> Most local grain was unsuitable millet. Salt had to be imported. Local wines may not have been considered palatable. The Byzantine army did indeed rely on imports. In such circumstances, Procopius, from a Byzantine perspective, might well suppose that the Lazi too relied on imports. Moreover, since bread and salt, not to mention wine, constituted the most basic of sustenance in classical thinking and were regarded as goods which no half-tolerable land needed to import, Lazica may well have seemed to Procopius to be an especially barren place, lacking these most basic essentials.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, as archaeology and literary sources confirm, there was also active trade of luxury goods into Lazica. It is quite possible that Procopius misinterpreted the busy luxury trade into Lazica as sure sign of the inadequacies of local supplies generally.

We should not be too harsh in our criticism of Procopius. I have tried to show that he is guilty of misconceptions and errors about the Lazian economy. But I hope that I have also showed that these misconceptions are explicable both in terms of his narrative and in terms of the broader historical situation. Moreover, Procopius has done well to draw attention to the vital link between economic and strategic issues in Lazica. He is right also to draw special attention to the importance of salt-imports: it may be significant that he lists salt first among Lazica's needs. It remains plausible that the Lazi (especially perhaps the Lazian elite) were discontented with Byzantine controls on trade. However, any such discontent seems to have arisen not from the supposed poverty of the Lazi, as Procopius imagined, but from their aspirations: they did not need to trade, as Procopius thought, but they did wish to trade. We may recall the kings of the neighbouring Abasgi, who were led by their desire for imported goods

Sarapanis, it would probably lie in good land, given the nature of this part of Lazica. For an attractive identification of Scanda, see now G. Saitidze, 'Skandes tsikhe', *Dzeglis megobari* 85 (1990) 1, pp. 54–61.

<sup>16</sup> Strabo, 11, p. 498; on water transport in late antique Georgia, see T. N. Beradze, *Moryeplavaniye i morskaya torgovlya v srednyevkovoy Gruzii* (Tbilisi, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Agathias 4.22.5.

<sup>18</sup> Especially Horace, *Satires* 2.2.18; cf. 1.13.13–15; Pliny, *HN* 31.89.

to castrate their most handsome subjects and sell them off as eunuchs.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the Abasgi, Procopius did draw the distinction between desire and necessity, for that suited his moralising purpose, but he did not draw that distinction clearly enough with regard to the Lazi.

*University of Exeter*

DAVID BRAUND

<sup>19</sup> Procopius, *Wars* 8.3.15ff.