

PRISCUS ON THE SUANI

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PRISCUS FR. 51 BLOCKLEY gives a brief insight into complex exchanges between the Byzantines, Lazi, Persians, and Suani.

Ὅτι μεγίστης πρὸς τὸ Σουάνων ἔθνος Ῥωμαίοις τε καὶ Λαζοῖς ὑπαρχούσης διαφορᾶς, καὶ σφόδρα ἐς τὴν τοῦ † σήματος τῶν Σουάνων συνισταμένων μάχην, καὶ Περσῶν δὲ ἐθελόντων αὐτῷ πολεμεῖν διὰ τὰ φρούρια, ἅπερ <ὑπὸ> τῶν Σουάνων ἀφῆρητο, πρεσβείαν ἔστειλεν, ἐπικούρους αὐτῷ διαπεμφθῆναι παρὰ βασιλέως αἰτῶν ἐκ τῶν παραφυλαττόντων στρατιωτῶν τὰ Ἀρμενίων ὄρια τῶν Ῥωμαίοις ὑποτελῶν, ἐφ' ᾧ προσχώρων ὄντων ἐτοίμην ἔχειν βοήθειαν, καὶ μὴ κινδυνεύειν τοὺς πόρρωθεν ἀπεκδεχόμενον, ἢ παραγενομένων ἐπιτρίβεσθαι δαπάνη, τοῦ πολέμου, ἂν οὕτω τύχη, διαναβαλλομένου, καθάπερ ἤδη πρότερον ἐγεγόνει. τῆς γὰρ σὺν Ἡρακλείῳ ἀπεσταλμένης βοηθείας, καὶ Περσῶν καὶ Ἰβήρων τῶν αὐτῷ ἐπαγόντων τὸν πόλεμον πρὸς ἐτέρων ἐθνῶν τότε ἀπασχοληθέντων μάχην, τὴν συμμαχίαν ἀπέπεμψεν ἀσφάλων ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν τροφῶν χορηγίᾳ, ὥστε αὐθις τῶν Πάρθων ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἀναζευζάντων Ῥωμαίους ἐπικαλέσασθαι.

Τῶν δὲ στείλαι τὴν βοήθειαν ἐπαγγελλομένων καὶ ἄνδρα τὸν αὐτῆς ἡγήσόμενον, παρεγένετο καὶ Περσῶν πρεσβεία ἀγγέλουσα τοὺς Κιδαρίτας Οὐννοὺς ὑπ' αὐτῶν κατηγωνίσθαι καὶ Βαλαάμ πόλιν αὐτῶν ἐκπεπολιορκηκέναι. ἐμήνουν δὲ τὴν νίκην καὶ βαρβαρικῶς ἐπεκόμπαζον τὴν παρ-

A very serious dispute existed between the Romans and Lazi and the nation of the Suani. The Suani were making war against . . . , and the Persians wished to go to war with him because of the forts which had been captured by the Suani. He, therefore, sent an embassy to the Romans, asking that reinforcements be sent by the Emperor from amongst the troops who were guarding the borders of that part of Armenia which was tributary to the Romans. Thus, since these were close at hand he would have ready assistance and would not be endangered while waiting for troops to come from a distance. Furthermore, he would not be burdened with the expense of supporting them if they came and the war were postponed, as had happened earlier. For when Heracleius was sent with help and the Persians and Iberians, who were at war with him, were diverted to fighting other peoples, he dismissed the reinforcements since he was worried about supporting them. As a result, when the Persians returned against him, he again called upon the Romans.

When the Romans had replied that they would send help and a man to command it, an embassy arrived from the Persians which announced that they had crushed the Kidarite Huns and had taken their city of Balaam. They reported their victory and in barbaric fashion boasted

οὖσαν αὐτοῖς μεγίστην δόναμιν ἀποφαίνειν
ἐθέλοντες. ἀλλὰ αὐτοὺς παραντίκα τούτων
ἀγγελθέντων ἀπέπεμπε βασιλεύς, ἐν μείζονι
φροντίδι τὰ ἐν Σικελίᾳ συνεχθέντα ποι-
ούμενος.

about it, since they wished to advertise
the very large force which they had at
present. But when they had made this
announcement, the Emperor straight-
away dismissed them, since he was more
concerned about events in Sicily.

The beginning of the fragment is textually corrupt, so that its content is rendered particularly obscure. However, that obscurity can be illuminated by a close examination both of the text of the fragment itself and of the traditional political allegiances and tensions in Transcaucasia. In this regard, the evidence of Menander the Guardsman is particularly important, since he not only gives a detailed account of relations between Byzantium, Persia, and the Suani in the sixth century, but also provides some information on the earlier course of those relations.

The fragment itself gives some firm data. The Romans and Lazi were in dispute with the Suani; this was a very serious dispute, which seems particularly to have concerned a battle fought by the Suani against an unknown opponent in an unknown place. Meanwhile, the Persians wished to go to war against a particular individual, who is not named, because of forts which had been taken away. That individual sought help from the Byzantine forces on the Armenian marchlands, having previously supported a Byzantine expeditionary force sent to help him against the Persians and Iberians about 468,¹ which was withdrawn and then replaced. As Byzantium was about to respond positively to his latest request for aid, the Persians announced their victory over the Kidarite Huns, apparently so as to show their capacity to sustain a war in Transcaucasia. Their scarcely veiled threat turned the emperor's thoughts westwards towards Sicily, away from the Suani.

Our first step is to identify the individual in question. The Lazi are introduced as principals in this affair, but, unlike the other principals, they do not recur; meanwhile, our unidentified individual is introduced. That in itself might lead us to suspect that the individual in question is a king or general of the Lazi. In any event, there seems to be no alternative. He cannot be a Byzantine, since he deals with the emperor as an ally and seems to be local to Transcaucasia. He cannot be a Persian or an Iberian, since he went to war with both those peoples. He cannot be a Suanian, for he envisages help from the Byzantines, at a time when the Byzantines were in serious dispute with the Suani. He must be a friend of the Byzantines, for he had received military aid from Byzantium and expected more: the Lazi are the only friends of Byzantium securely identifiable in the fragment. When this is all taken into account, there seems good reason to interpret the fragment

¹ PLRE 2 Heraclius 4.

on the basis that the individual is a prominent Lazian.² Nothing in the circumstantial detail renders that identification implausible.

The Persians were ready to go to war with Byzantium's ally in Transcaucasia (the Lazi, it seems). Their reason was a taking away of forts which involved the Suani. Crucially, Bekker's insertion of ὁπό makes the Suani the agents of the removal of these forts. However, it is unclear why Persia should wish to act against the Lazi in response to aggression by the Suani. Although it is true that the Lazi and Byzantines considered the Suani to be part of the Lazian empire (as Blockley stresses [*ibid.*]), that connection seems always to have been less than secure. Moreover, the Persians are recorded as asserting the independence of the Suani, albeit rather later and when it suited them to do so.³

It is conceivable that the Persians held the Lazi responsible for Suanian aggression, but it remains to explain why they prepared to fight not the Suani themselves, but the Lazi. Moreover, Priscus indicates that the Byzantines, together with the Lazi, were at odds with the Suani at this juncture. If both Persia and Byzantium were at odds with the Suani, it is hard to account for the brooding hostility between them over this affair. Furthermore, if the Lazi too were in dispute with the Suani, as Priscus stresses, then any Persian threat to the Lazi motivated by the actions of the Suani would have been notably misdirected.

The complexities of Transcaucasian diplomacy are such that some rationale might be hypothesised to account for these difficulties. However, it should first be observed that all difficulties can be traced to Bekker's ὁπό. The insertion is unobjectionable on linguistic grounds, but it gives poor sense. Moreover, it is not required, for the transmitted text reads well enough without it. Accordingly, although Bekker's insertion has proved popular, de Boor saw fit to restrict it to his apparatus and to retain the transmitted text unchanged.⁴ Without Bekker's insertion the passage seems no longer to present any difficulties.

On the transmitted text, without Bekker's insertion, the forts were not taken away by the Suani, but *from* the Suani. The course of events immediately becomes comprehensible. The Persians were ready to wage war on the Lazi because forts had been taken away from the Suani, possibly in the context of the battle mentioned by Priscus. Presumably, the Lazi, who had imperial ambitions on Suania, were responsible for the seizure of

²R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire* 2 (Liverpool 1983) 398, shares this view, with minimal argument.

³Notably, Men. Prot. fr. 6.1, esp. lines 545–603, Blockley.

⁴Bekker's insertion is notably adopted by Müller, *FHG* 4, p. 109, fr. 41; L. A. Dindorf, *Historici Graeci minores* 1 (Leipzig 1870) p. 349, fr. 41; and Blockley (above, n. 2) 358, fr. 51. Contrast C. de Boor, *Excerpta de legationibus gentium ad Romanos* (Berlin 1903) p. 590, 22.

these forts. The battle-lines are not only clear, but familiar from Menander the Guardsman.⁵ On one side, Byzantium supported the Lazi in their attempt to secure imperial domination over the Suani. On the other, Persia supported Suanian resistance to the Lazi and alliance with the Persian empire. Bekker's insertion is best removed and the fragment interpreted accordingly.

These events occurred under Leo. It may be no coincidence that Lazian suzerainty over the Suani seems to have lapsed in the reign of that very emperor. As Leo looked westwards to Sicily, the Suani took advantage of Persian support to free themselves from the Lazian empire in Transcaucasia.

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⁵Men. Prot. fr. 6.1, 584 Blockley.