

Nika KHOPERIA* (GIPA / Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia)

The Daylamite Involvement in the Lazic War (541-562)

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Abstract: *In the Late Antiquity, the Caucasus region had become a battle ground for the Byzantines and the Sasanians. The conflict between the two great empires escalated in the 6th century, when both sides overcame internal conflicts and pursued active foreign policies. The Lazic War (541-562 CE), fought on the territory of modern western Georgia, then the Lazic Kingdom, was one of the most important conflicts of the Late Antiquity and an integral part of the unremitting wars of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. The conflict witnessed both sides employing combatant populations residing within the borders of their empires. Among them were the Daylamites, a kin-group from the rugged mountains of northern Iran, just south of the Caspian Sea who had long served as mercenaries for various powers. This article discusses the combat culture, tactics, equipment, and role of the Daylamites in the Sasanian military campaigns in the Caucasus in the 6th century CE.*

Key words: Lazic War, Sasanians, Iran, Byzantine empire, Daylamites, infantry, Justinian, Khosrow Anushirvan

During the Lazic War between Iran and Byzantium (541-562), both sides employed forces gathered from across the vast reaches of their respective empires. The Iranian army, in particular, engaged a large number of the Daylamite warriors from the mountains of northern Iran. Several historic regions can be identified along the southern shores of the Caspian Sea: Daylam, Tabaristan, Gilan, and Gurgan. The historic Daylam encompassed the southwestern corner of the Caspian littoral where the remote and inaccessible Alborz Mountain range created a rugged and barren environment that the ancient Iranians viewed as outright infernal. According to the *Avesta*, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism, the supreme deity Ahura Mazda created the southern Caspian amongst the lesser regions of the world, the hostile and threatening “fourteenth place” that was populated by the destructive spirit that caused “abnormal issues in women” and “barbarian oppression”.¹ Mount Damavend, the highest peak in the Alborz range, had long been associated in Zoroastrian cosmology with a mountain that offered the gateway to/from hell. Within ancient

* ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3076-965X>. nika.khoperia.1@iliauni.edu.ge; Georgian Institute of Public Affairs.

¹ *Vendidad* 1.17; For an interesting discussion see Bromberger, 2011; 2013.

cosmogony, one's place of origin and its climate determined ethnic attributes and behaviors. Thus, the Daylamites long held a reputation for belligerence, rebellion, and heresy. Within the Zoroastrian mythology, the inhabitants of the southern Caspian did not descend from the same peoples who gave rise to the Iranian people and were thus perceived as foreigners who resided in a "strange, forbidding land where demons and strange beasts reputedly lived."²

Living in such inhospitable environment, the Daylamites had thus gained a reputation as strong, resilient, fierce, and capable warriors who were renowned for their skills with the sword, spear, and dagger. They were first mentioned in the writings of Polybius (2nd century BCE) and Claudius Ptolemy (2nd century CE), although Iranian sources speak of them only from the Sasanian period.³ In the 6th century, Byzantine scholar Procopius of Caesarea observed that

"these Daylami are barbarians who live in the middle of Persia, but have never been subject to the king of the Persians. They inhabit sheer mountain-sides that are altogether inaccessible, and so they have continued to live autonomously from ancient times down to the present day."⁴

Another important Byzantine writer of the Justinian era, Agathias of Myrina, commented that the Daylamites were

"accustomed for the most part to fight alongside the Persians, though not as the conscript contingents of a subject people since they are in fact free and independent and it is not in their nature to submit to any form of compulsion."⁵

The Byzantine authors seem to have a fairly good understanding of the internal political situation in Iran, as the obedience of the Daylamites to the Shah of Iran took the form of an alliance rather than that of imperial subjugation. During the fall of the Parthian kingdom and the rise to power of the Sasanid dynasty in Iran, Daylam was a part of the Gushnasp kingdom, which remained loyal to the Sasanian Shah Ardashir I (224-242 CE). The ruling dynasty of Gushnasp existed as late as the reign of Shah Peroz in the late 5th century. Procopius informs us that towards the end of his reign, Sasanid Shah Kavad I (488-531 CE) had "sent a considerable army against Gourgenes and the Iberians, and as general a Persian with the rank of varizes (Wahriz), Boes by name."⁶ The title of *Wahriz* was traditionally held by the rulers of Daylam – for

² *Bundahishn* 15.25-31. Frye, 1963: 8.

³ Minorsky, 1991: 190.

⁴ Procop. *Pers.* 8.14.

⁵ Agath. 3.17-18.

⁶ Procop. *Pers.* 1.12; Felix & Madelung, 1995: 342-347. As Vladimir Minorsky (1991: 190) mentions, Khosrow I's expedition to the Yemen (ca. 570 C.E.) consisted of 800 prisoners from Daylam and

example, Wahriz who occupied Yemen in the 570s was also acknowledged as the ruler of Daylam.⁷ Mohsen Zakeri notes that Sasanid monarchs were in need of strong garrisons in city of Qazvin, a strategic point for the defense of the Persian heartland against northern invaders, such as self-willed and aggressive Daylamites.⁸

The Daylamites began to play a more prominent role in the Sasanian army in the 6th century.⁹ The military reforms of Kavad and Khosrow I Anushirvan (531-579 CE) transformed the Iranian *Spah* into a more powerful, numerous, and better balanced military force. Historian James Howard-Johnston correctly points out that during this period the Sasanians possessed an advantage in both heavy cavalry and heavy infantry but lost it by the 6th century when the Romans were able to overcome their shortcomings and developed heavier units for both offensive and defensive warfare.¹⁰ Confronted by the vast challenge of fighting the Byzantines in Lazica, the Sasanians, whose main advantage remained in the heavy and light cavalry, sought a better equipped and trained infantry that was suitable for operations in mountainous and wooded terrain and well-fortified locations.¹¹ They partly addressed this need by recruiting greater numbers of the Daylamites into their army.

Most of the information about the Daylamites fighting in the Sasanid army comes from the surviving sources about the Lazic War, especially the writings of Procopius of Caesarea and Agathias of Myrina. The Daylamites are first mentioned in the accounts of the siege of the Archaeopolis, a strategically important fortress in Lazica. When the Iranian commander, Mermeroes, prepared an attack on this fortress, he initially dispatched the Daylamite (Greek: Dolomitai) warriors and instructed them to harass and pin down the enemy. According to Prokopios, Daylamites could run as fast over cliffs and mountain peaks just they did on flat plains.¹² With the Daylamites launching a diversion, Mermeroes led the rest of the army, including battering rams and war elephants, to the lower gates of the fortress. While the Iranian and Sabir archers fired their arrows at the walls, the Daylamites climbed the nearby cliffs and threw their javelins with such precision

neighbouring places, and was led by an old man, also released from prison, bearing the title of wahriz. When under Kavad and Khosrow the passes of the Caucasus were fortified and military colonies settled near them, the names of the latter reflected their origin from Daylam and its neighbourhood.

⁷ Felix & Madelung, 1995: 342-347. When the Muslim Arabs invaded Yemen in the 7th century, the commander of the Daylamites of Yemen, Fayrouz (Peroz) al-Daylam, converted to Islam with his people and joined them; Nicolle, 1996: 68.

⁸ Zakeri, 1995: 118-119.

⁹ Farrokh & Khorasani, 2020: 31-32, with further references.

¹⁰ Howard-Johnston, 2012: 112.

¹¹ According to Kaveh Farrokh (2017: 36), due to Daylamite infantry, military capabilities of Sasanian *Spah* greatly increased, especially in the mountainous, forested countries, where the potential of heavy or light cavalry is significantly limited.

¹² Procop. *Pers.* 8.14.

and intensity that that the Byzantine defenders were almost forced to leave their positions.¹³

Taking advantage of this protective cover of arrows and javelins, Mermeroes attempted to take the city with a powerful assault. Yet, his battle plan went awry. A Byzantine counterattack surprised the attackers. “When confusion thus fell upon the army of the Medes”, describes Procopius,

“those stationed in back, seeing the confusion of those in front of them but having no real knowledge of what had happened, became panic-stricken and turned to retreat in great disorder. The Daylamites also experienced this (for they were fighting from the higher positions and could see all that was happening), and they too began to flee in a disgraceful manner, so the rout became decisive.”¹⁴

The Sasanians had thus suffered a major defeat at the Archaeopolis and were forced to retreat.

The Daylamites are discussed in Agathias’ account of the fighting following the siege of Archaeopolis.¹⁵ The Byzantine scholars in fact offers a lengthy account of the night raid launched by the Daylamites against the Byzantines, during which the Lazian guide managed to escape and warn the Byzantines, which resulted in a crushing defeat of the Daylamites.¹⁶ Even though these accounts describe the Daylamites as having no particular success during the Lazic War, both Byzantine chroniclers speak very highly of the Daylamites as redoubtable warriors and fearsome opponents. Their failures were largely due to the formidable defensive positions that the Byzantines and the Lazians held in the region, as well as the unremitting logistical and communication problems that the Sasanians experienced during this war. Moreover, the frequent references to the Daylamites during the Lazic War testify to their continued relevance and importance for the Sasanians, who needed large numbers of infantry to sustain offensive operations in mountainous terrain and to capture and garrison towns and fortresses.

It was probably the exhaustion from the Byzantine-Sasanian Wars that made the Daylamites some of the first units of the Sasanian army to switch sides and support the invading Muslim Arab forces in 630s.; on one occasion, some 4 000 Daylamites

¹³ Procop. *Pers.* 8.14.

¹⁴ Procop. *Pers.* 8.14.

¹⁵ Agath. 3.17-18, 22; 25-28; 4.13-14.

¹⁶ Agath. 3.18. the Romans had placed 2,000 Nachoragan sent 3,000 Daylamite footmen to surprise them during the night. Instead, the Sabirs ambushed the Daylamites when they entered the empty Sabir encampment. The Sabirs killed 800 of their enemies and when the defenders of Archaeopolis saw what had happened in the morning they sent their cavalry in pursuit and they managed to kill more of them; Syväne, 2021: 315.

converted to Islam and became allies of Banū Tamīm tribe.¹⁷ The Daylamites, together with the other Iranians who joined the Arabs, were called *Hamrā* or the Red People,¹⁸ and often distinguished themselves among the Islamic military elite. Nusayr Abu Hamza, the Abbasid commander who was sent to quell the powerful Zinji uprising (869-883 CE), is believed to have been a Daylamite. The Daylamites were among the ‘Ghilman’ guard of the Abbasid caliphs, and, in general, served in various parts of the caliph’s army.¹⁹ The spread of the Shia Islam amongst the Daylamites, however, engendered a prolonged conflict with the caliphs, who never fully conquered northern Iran. In fact, in the 11th century, the Daylam dynasty, the Buyids,²⁰ established their own state where they consciously revived symbols and practices of the Sasanian Empire and claimed a more solid foundation for their influence in wider Iran.²¹

Discussing the Daylamite performance during the Lazic War, Prokopios and Agathias of Myrina offers us interesting details on their weapons, tactics, and military culture. The Daylamites stood out in the Sasanian ranks because of their remarkable valor and formidable skills not just with bows and javelins but also with the cold steel weapons. According to Prokopios, the Daylamites were all foot soldiers, each man carrying a sword, shield and three two-pronged javelins (*zhupin*) that could be used both for stabbing and throwing. Some warriors were also equipped with a battle axe, ‘tabardzin’, that was particularly effective in breaking through the enemy armour.²² Prokopios’ description of the Daylamite armament is noteworthy for the latter-day references found in the Muslim chronicles. During the Buyid period, the Daylamites continued to fight on foot and employed swords, painted shields, battle axes, bows and arrows, and, more notably, two *zhupin* javelins – ‘mazrak’ in Arabic – which differed greatly from the long spears carried by the Arab warriors in the Buyid employment. In the Daylam, the *zhupins* were part of the daily accoutrement of the males and were allowed even at the communal and tribal gatherings. Moreover, the *zhupin* javelin acquired a ceremonial role as well and was a characteristic of a Daylamite guardsman, just like the maces of the Ghaznavid ghulams.²³

Descriptions of the Daylamite warriors’s armament can be found in the Persian epic poem *Vis u Ramin*, which exercised considerable influence on the Georgian

¹⁷ Mohsen Zakeri (1995: 191-192) notes that 4 thousand Daylamite soldiers were the members of the imperial guard of the Sasanid shah Khosrow II Parwiz, who joined the Muslims during the course of the conquest. Their number increased as other units of the Daylamite soldiers from Qazwin resided in Kufa.

¹⁸ Kennedy, 2001: 5. Zakeri, 1995: 117.

¹⁹ Kennedy, 2001: 151-152, 157, 162.

²⁰ The Būyids were conscious of their Daylamite identity and depended on Daylamite soldiers but were not fashioned as ‘rulers of the Daylamites’; Haldon, 2021: 103.

²¹ Nagel, 1990: 578-586; Baker, 2016: 281-288; Buyids ruled Fars, Ray, Jibal and Baghdad in late 10th and in the first half of 11th century. Their rule and its political tradition disappeared in the 11th century, just as Gothic, Burgundian, or Lombard rule had disappeared from the West centuries ago; Pohl, 2021: 60.

²² Procop. *Pers.* 8.14; For discussion of the Daylamite weaponry see also Farrokh, 2017: 123.

²³ Minorsky, 1991: 190.

literary tradition, where it became very popular through a twelfth-century free translation entitled *Visramiani*. The poem makes references to the *zhupin*, shield and ‘nawak’, i.e. cross-bow or some other similar contrivance for firing arrows from a tube.²⁴ These terms entered the Georgian vocabulary. Compiling his famed dictionary of the Georgian language, the seventeenth-century Georgian scholar Sulikhan-Saba Orbeliani included short hurling spear ‘zufan’, longer ‘mazrak’ spear, and ‘tabari’ and ‘tabardzeni’ battle axes.²⁵ Georgian military historian Mamuka Tsurtssumia pointed out recently that none of these weapons were widespread in medieval Georgia and that javelins are rarely mentioned in Georgian sources, mostly in reference to combat in mountainous areas.²⁶

In Late Antiquity, the Daylamites enjoyed a reputation of versatile warriors who could navigate difficult terrain, capably operate bows, engage in hand-to-hand combat, and break through enemy lines. The Daylamites were obviously well-trained tactically and were able to deploy and rearrange their formations according to the situation on the battlefield. Agathias points out that the Daylamites moved fast on the battlefield and typically sought to secure the strategic high grounds so they could be better positioned to pursue the retreating enemy. “Well-versed as they are in practically every type of warfare, they inflict considerable harm on their enemies”, concluded the Byzantine scholar.²⁷ Discussing the advantages the Sasanians possessed against their opponents, military historian James Howard-Johnston correctly includes the Daylamite light infantry capable of skillfully operating in the rugged and mountainous landscape.²⁸ The Daylamites should not be, however, considered a classic light infantry, whose task it was to shower the enemy with javelins or arrows and then shelter behind the heavy infantry and serve in auxiliary capacity. The Daylamites serve as a hybrid model that combined elements of heavy infantry – heavier equipment, tactical employment against the Byzantine heavy infantry – with the flexibility of light infantry that could be employed in rough terrain or maneuvered quickly into the desired position.

Equipment, similar to that of the Daylamites; a sword, a shield and two javelins, was considered almost optimal, and even standard, in the infantry armies of the various states of the Mediterranean or the Middle East, starting from the Antiquity Period. In antiquity, the Thracians and Greeks had light infantry warriors called ‘Peltasts’ after their shield (Pelte). They were armed with several javelins. The term ‘psiloi’ combined all types of light infantry in the ancient Greek armies – archers, peltasts, slingers. Throwing spears, named Pilums (traditionally, there were two), were used by Roman legionaries armed with oval shields and short swords (Gladius) starting

²⁴ Bosworth, 1965: 149.

²⁵ Orbeliani, 1949: 130, 188, 333.

²⁶ Tsurtssumia, 2016: 424; *Book of the Feudals*, 108.

²⁷ Agath. 3.17.

²⁸ Howard-Johnston, 2012: 112.

as early as the Republican period.²⁹ The Roman light infantry, the Velites, were equipped with javelins. Their function was to harass the enemy, weaken their ranks, and give chase after winning the battle.³⁰

In the late Roman Period, the main model of heavy infantry equipment consisted of three main components: a sword (*spatha*), a shield, and a throwing weapon (a short javelin *Veruta*, and darts: *Martiobarbuli* or *Plumbatae*). As can be seen from the Maurice's *Strategikon* works, the same equipment was dominant in the Byzantine infantry in the 6th-7th centuries.³¹ In the Byzantine Empire, light infantry peltasts can be found in the early medieval military manual Maurice's *Strategikon*, and in the 11th century, in the Byzantine army of the Komnenian era, as the infantry, who, unlike the ancient peltasts, apart from fulfilling the role of the infantry, also participated in hand-to-hand combat actively.³² It seems that the Daylamites were, functionally, closest to this type of light infantry.

In summary, we can conclude that the Daylamites served as a crucial element of the Sasanian military, allowing the shahs to complement their armies, cavalry dominated as they were, with a well trained and equipped infantry force. This military contingent grew in importance during the reigns of Kavad I and Khosrow I Anushirvan and their emergence as the military elite is well illustrated by the prolonged employment in the wars in the Caucasus.

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²⁹ Erdkamp, 2011: 18, 69.

³⁰ Erdkamp, 2011: 69.

³¹ MacDowall, 1995: 11.

³² Birkenmeier, 2002: 61, 65-66, 73, 86, 132, 163, 216.

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