Heraclius. A Commander in the Service of Leo I and Zeno*

Abstract. Heraclius’ career, the one that can be traced in primary sources, lasted seven years. In its course he held the position of comes rei militaris and, perhaps, magister militum vacans and magister militum per Thracias. His greatest victories came in a war against the Vandals. They forced Gaiseric, the Vandal’s leader to undertake peace negotiations. However, these victories were eclipsed by Heraclius’ failures in the fight against Theodoric Strabo’s Goths and by the shameful circumstances of his death.

Keywords: Heraclius, Emperor Leo, Emperor Zeno, the Vandals, the Goths

The career of Heraclius, the hero of this text, began during the reign of Emperor Leo I, and ended, (not in the best of styles, to put it mildly), during the beginnings of the reign of Emperor Zeno. No separate study has so far been devoted to Heraclius, which is not, of course, to say that he has received no attention from scholars¹. The purpose of this article is to trace his career and to reproduce the way in which he was portrayed in primary sources.

¹ This text was created as part of the project financed from the funds of the National Science Centre, Poland, granted under decision no. DEC-2018/31/B/HS3/03038.

We have no knowledge of when he was born, but we know where he was from and what his father’s name was. According to Theophanes, his family town was Edessa and his father, referred to by the chronographer as τοῦ ἀπὸ ὑπάτων, bore the name of Florus. It seems that Heraclius embarked upon a military career. This view is supported by the fact that all the available references made to him in primary sources pertain to his military activity. The first of those references concerns the events that, while dated to 467, took place on the empire’s eastern border. At the time, Heraclius was placed in charge of a unit whose task was to support the Lazi in their struggle against the Persians and Iberians. As can be inferred from Priscus’ account, these troops were detached from the forces stationed on the border between Byzantium and the part of Armenia that recognized the Byzantine authority. It is believed that during the expedition, Heraclius served as comes rei militaris. We do not know the details of the operation in which he was involved.

2 The first reference regarding Heraclius pertains to 467. The mission with which he was entrusted at the time by Emperor Leo I required some military experience. For this reason, his birth can be cautiously dated to the 430s or the beginning of the 440s.

3 Theophanes, Chronographia, AM 5963, rec. C. de Boor, Lipsiae 1883 (cetera: Theophanes), p. 117.

4 Scholars usually indicate that Heraclius came from Edessa but do not specify which Edessa they pertain to cf. for example O. Seeck, Herakleios..., col. 503; PLRE II, p. 541; L. Jarosz, Wschodnio-rzymscy..., p. 201. Only Ch. Begass (Die Senatsaristokratie..., p. 143) refers specifically to Macedonian Edessa, but provides no justification for this view. It certainly cannot be justified based on Theophanes’ account in which Heraclius is referred to as τὸν ᾽Εδεσηνόν and which does not provide any additional information. It is worth noting that Edessa is mentioned in Chronorgahia only in reference to the town in Syria (Theophanes, AM 5864, 5867, 5997, 6017, 6079, 6095, 6096, 6118, 6119, 6120, 6125, 6128, 6130, 6145, 6170, 6217, 6232, 6235). That is why it is this Edessa that should be considered to be the town Heraclius was from, and not that situated in Macedonia.

5 Theophanes, AM 5963, p. 117; Ioannis Antiocheni Fragmenta quae Supersunt Omnia, 233, ed. S. Mariev, Berolini–Novi Eboraci 2008 [= CFHB, 47] (cetera: JOHN OF ANTIOCH), p. 424; given the fact that the name Florus (PLRE II, p. 482, s.v. Florus 3) does not figure in the lists of Consuls (R.S. Bagnall, Al. Cameron, S.R. Schwartz, K.A. Worp, Consuls of the Later Roman Empire, Atlanta 1987, p. 713–714), it is believed that he was honorary consul. Since honorary consuls are recorded from the reign of Zeno, E. Stein (Histoire du Bas-Empire, vol. II, De la disparition de l’Empire d’Occident à la mort de Justinien (476–465), Paris–Bruxelles–Amsterdam 1949, p. 68, note 4) believed that Florus should be identified with Florentinus, consul from 429, a prominent figure both during the reign of Theodosius II and during the beginnings of the reign of Marcian (PLRE II, p. 478–480, s.v. Fl. Florentius 7). This hypothesis is not necessarily right and it cannot be ruled out that Florus was given the title of honorary consul during the reign of Zeno, after his son’s death – PLRE II, p. 482.


7 PLRE II, p. 542.
All we know is that it was dropped because of the difficulties encountered in supplying his troops with necessary provisions. This unfortunate development did not cause Heraclius to lose the emperor’s confidence. Quite the contrary, the latter must even have become convinced of his military skills since he entrusted him with a very responsible task in the war against the Vandals.

In 468, Emperor Leo I prepared a great expedition against the Vandals for which he laid down huge financial means and raised significant forces. The charge of the expedition was handed over to Basiliskos, the emperor’s brother-in-law. We have two testimonies regarding the expedition. One comes from Procopius of Caesarea and the other from Theophanes, both of whom are believed to have relied in their account of it on the work by Priscos, although it remains unknown whether they drew on it directly or through Eusthatius of Epiphany. My goal is not to use those testimonies to reconstruct the course of the expedition, which is known to have ended in Byzantium’s defeat, but to trace Heraclius’ role in it. Based on Procopius’ account, Heraclius was given command of the forces whose task was to attack Tripolitania from Byzantium. We are told that he carried out the attack perfectly and after defeating the Vandals in a battle (whose location is not indicated by Procopius) and capturing a number of towns, he marched on Carthage. Following the defeat suffered by the Byzantine fleet near the Cap Bon, fifty kilometres away from Carthage, Heraclius, just like the remains of Basiliskos’ troops, departed for home. Where it pertains to Heraclius’ participation in the war against the Vandals, Theophanes’ account is in some respects different from that of Procopius. It also provides more details. The Byzantine chronographer placed his reference to the expedition of Heraclius, next to whom he also mentioned Marsus.

8 Priscus, 51.1.
11 Theophanes, AM 5961 (contains the account of the Basiliscus’ activity in 468); cf. AM 5963 (contains the account of the expedition led by Heraclius and Marsus).
12 On the use by later authors of Priscos’ account of the 468 expedition against the Vandals, including Procopius and Theophanes, see: D. Brodka, Priskos und der Feldzug des Basiliskos gegen Geiserich (468), [in:] Griechische Profanhistoriker des fünften nachchristlichen Jahrhundert, ed. T. Stickler, B. Bleckmann, Stuttgart 2014, p. 103–120.
13 Procopius, III, 6.9. Procopius’ phrase ἐκ Βυζαντίου does not allow us to indicate where exactly the forces led by Heraclius and Marsus set out from. Scholars usually omit this issue, following Theophanes who in this context mentioned Egypt.
14 Procopius, III, 6.25, trans. p. 63.
15 Theophanes, AM 5963.
as his co-commander\(^\text{16}\) (Marsus is absent from Procopius’ account), under the year 470/471, that is, two years after Basiliskos’ expedition. According to Theophanes, Heraclius and Marsus set out from Egypt and captured by surprise Tripoli and many other towns in Libya. With their success, Gaiseric, the Vandals’ ruler, was forced to undertake peace negotiations with Leo\(^\text{17}\), a step to which the emperor agreed since he was readying himself for a final battle against Aspar and his sons. To defeat the latter, he needed the support of Basiliscus, Heraclius and Marsus. Scholars have had trouble trying to reconcile the two accounts\(^\text{18}\). The essential problem that arises here concerns the question of whether the expedition of Heraclius and Marsus was part of the campaign of 468, or whether it constituted a distinct operation that took place later. However, from the perspective of Heraclius’ career, it is of secondary importance. Both Theophanes and Procopius unequivocally indicate that Heraclius carried out a successful operation against the Vandals and proved himself a good commander. Consequently, he must have gained recognition in the eyes of the emperor who started treating him as his trusted man.

It is not clear what position Heraclius held during his struggle against the Vandals. No source informs us of it\(^\text{19}\). The view to be found in modern scholarship is that, just as during the operation in the East of 467, he was *comes rei militaris\(^\text{20}\). The operation against the Vandals was clearly more important than that in which Heraclius took part in 467. It thus cannot be excluded that in sending

---

\(^\text{16}\) On Marsus, who was of Isaurian descent, see: *PLRE* II, p. 728–729, *s.v.* Marsus 2; Ch. Begass, *Die Senatsaristokratie...,* p. 190–191.

\(^\text{17}\) There is no certainty that the negotiations resulted in signing a peace treaty. On this issue see M. Wilczyński, *Gejzeryk...,* p. 178.

\(^\text{18}\) Some of today’s scholars who deal with this issue consider Procopius’ account to be credible, which leads them to conclude that Heraclius’ units were engaged in one of the three main operations which were carried out in 468 (the remaining two involved the attack of the forces led by Basiliscus and the activity of the lord of Dalmacia, Marcellin, in Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily. This view can be found in: *PLRE* II, p. 542; J. Strzelczyk, *Wandalowie i ich afrykańskie państwo*, Warszawa 1992, p. 143–144). Scholars who give priority to Theophanes’ account claim that the operation of Heraclius and Marsus was not bound up with Basiliscus’ expedition of 468 and took place in 470 or 471 (Ł. Pigoński, *Polityka...,* p. 154–157, 164; idem, *The Shields of the Empire. Eastern Roman Military Elites during the Reigns of the Emperors Theodosius II, Marcian and Leo I*, Łódź–Kraków 2023 [= BL, 47], p. 163–166). The most numerous are scholars who try to reconcile the two accounts. They indicate that the troops led by Heraclius and Marsus took part in the 468 campaign and after Basiliskos’ defeat stayed in Africa until 470 or 471 (e.g.: R.C. Blockley, *East Roman...,* p. 76; A. Merrills, R. Miles, *The Vandals*, Oxford 2010, p. 122; Y. Modéran, *Les Vandalies et l’Empire Romain*, Arles 2014, p. 198; R. Steinacher, *Die Vandalen...,* p. 222; M. Wilczyński, *Gejzeryk...,* p. 176–178; P. Crawford, *Roman Emperor Zeno. The Perils of Power Politics in Fifth-century Constantinople*, Yorkshire–Philadelphia 2019, p. 70, 84, 86; R.A. Bleeker, *Aspar...,* p. 155).

\(^\text{19}\) Neither Procopius (III, 6.25), nor Theophanes (AM 5963) wrote about it. They only mentioned that he had been sent by Leo against Gaiseric.

\(^\text{20}\) For example *PLRE* II, p. 542; P. Crawford, *Roman Emperor...,* p. 67.
Heraclius and Marsus on their mission, the emperor entrusted them with the position of *magister militum vacans*, as is suggested by E. Glušanin\(^{21}\).

We do not know what role Heraclius played in Leo’s bloody crackdown against Aspar, which took place in 471\(^{22}\). Sources provide us with no information about it. All we know is that he behaved loyally to the emperor to the end of his reign and remained in the circle of his close associates. The same can be said of Heraclius’ attitude towards Zeno, Leo’s brother-in-law, with whose reign the last known episode from Heraclius’ life is bound up. It concerned the empire’s struggle against Theodoric Strabo’s Goths in Thrace. It seems that after rising to power, Zeno decided to withdraw the concessions that Leo had made to Theodoric in 473\(^{23}\) and sent against him the troops led by Heraclius. During the fighting, of which we have no knowledge, Heraclius was taken captive in circumstances that remain unknown. According to Malchus\(^{24}\), Zeno sent envoys to the Gothic ruler to negotiate Heraclius’ release. Theodoric agreed to free the emperor’s commander for one hundred talents. The burden of paying the ransom was placed on Heraclius’ family who raised the needed sum. Having received the money, Theodoric ordered Heraclius to be released. However, on his way back home the Byzantine commander was killed by the Goths. We have two testimonies regarding his death. According to John of Antioch, it was Theodoric himself who killed Heraclius at the walls of the Thracian Chersonesos\(^{25}\). Malchus, in turn, claims that some Gothic soldiers took his life in Arcadiopolis in revenge for the cruelties he had committed\(^{26}\). It is hard to say which version is true. More seems to speak in favour of the second one, which is more detailed\(^{27}\). However, it cannot be known for sure. An attempt to reconcile the two accounts would lead us to the following conclusion: First, Heraclius was killed; second, he was killed by Goths, and third, his death took place in Thrace.

\(^{21}\) E.П. ГЛУШАНИН, *Военная знать ранней Византии*, Барнаул 1991, p. 130. The Russian scholar presents the following justification of his hypothesis: Организация вандальской экспедиции 468 г. очень близко напоминает африканский поход 441 г., презентального магистра Ареовинда с рядом magistri vacantes (Theoph. AM 5941). This line of argument indicates that Heraclius’ and Marsus’ expedition was part of the 468 campaign.

\(^{22}\) The issue of the reasons and circumstances of the attempt on the lives of Aspar and his sons has recently been covered by: P. CRAWFORD, *Roman Emperor…*, p. 79–89; R.A. BLEEKER, *Aspar…*, p. 167–171; Ł. PIGONSKI, *The Shields…*, p. 169–173.


\(^{25}\) JOHN OF ANTIoCH, 233.

\(^{26}\) MALCHUS, 6.2. According to this account, Heraclius had both his head and his hands cut off.

\(^{27}\) This version of the circumstances of Heraclius’ death is advocated, among others, by Ł. JAROSZ, *Teodoryk…*, p. 220; M. WILCZYSKI, *Germanie…*, p. 411, note 40.
It is believed that during the campaign against the Goths, Heraclius held the position of *magister militum per Thracias*. This view is based on the testimony of Malchus and, to some extent, on that of John of Antioch. Malchus referred to Heraclius as strategist, but he did not indicate the area in which Heraclius had commanded. Since the operations against the Vandals were conducted in Thrace, one is led to conclude that the position he held was *magisterium militum per Thracias*. As far as John of Antioch’s testimony is concerned, it basically gives us no clue in this respect: “Ὅτι ἐπὶ Ζήνωνος τοῦ βασιλέως Θεοδώριχος ὁ Τριαρίου τὴν στρατηγίδα τῶν Θρᾳκίων διέπων Ἰηρακλείου τὸν Φλώρου […].” Taken literally, this passage indicates that the position of *magister militum per Thracias* was held by Theodoric Strabo. However, the text is believed to be damaged at this point, which opens up the possibility of suggesting that the post was held by Heraclius.

As regards the question of when Heraclius served as *magister militum per Thracias*, it is claimed that he held the post during the beginnings of Zeno’s reign, that is after January 474, and ceased to exercise it a few months before 9 January 475, which is when the emperor was forced to flee Constantinople because of Basilius’ conspiracy. From this it follows that he exercised the position of *magister militum per Thracias* just for a few months in 474. However, it cannot be entirely ruled out that he was appointed to the position towards the end of Leo’s reign. The last known *magister militum per Thracias* to serve before Heraclius was Armatus. However, we do not know exactly when Armatus’ mission came to an end.

The family. Except for the name of his father, we do not have specific information regarding members of Heraclius’ family, and he certainly had one, if Emperor Zeno shifted the burden of raising a significant amount of money to buy him out.

---

29 Malchus, 6.1–2.
30 PLRE II, p. 542, 1074 (emendation from διέπων to διέποντα is suggested, which makes it possible to relate τὴν στρατηγίδα τῶν Θρᾳκίων to Heraclius); John of Antioch, p. 425, note 1.
33 PLRE II, p. 542; L. Jarosz, *Wschodniorzymscy…*, p. 202–203. It should be noted that after Heraclius’ death the command of the troops that continued to fight against Theodoric Strabo’s Goths as late as 484 was given to Illus (John of Antioch, 233). However, it is not known which position the latter was appointed to (cf. PLRE II, p. 588). Illus proved successful in the fight against the Goths and even managed to take part in the action that resulted in Zone’s removal.
34 This would be at odds with Malchus’ account (6.1) who clearly writes that Heraclius was strategist during Zeno’s reign, but it cannot be ruled out that this author was interested not in the moment at which Heraclius had been appointed to the position of *magister militum per Thracias*, but in the activity in which he was involved while holding the post, and this activity made itself apparent during Zeno’s reign.
of the Gothic captivity\textsuperscript{36} onto its shoulders. The ability to raise the money clearly indicates that the family was well-off. Some scholars suggest, that he was a predecessor of Emperor Heraclius (610–641)\textsuperscript{37}. However, there is no evidence to support this opinion.

\textbf{The opinion}. Malchus left us with a view of Heraclius as a man who was brave and valorous, but not very prudent. He was also impetuous and refused to listen to other people’s advice, which, we are told, brought about his downfall\textsuperscript{38}. Malchus also hinted that he had been cruel\textsuperscript{39}. Theophanes in turn referred to Heraclius and Marsus as δραστήριοι\textsuperscript{40}, which is meant to convey the meaning of both effective and enterprising as well as defiant\textsuperscript{41}. The last meaning corresponds to some extent to the opinion expressed by Malchus. However, can the first meaning of the word δραστήριοι be considered to be distant from Malchus’ perception of Heraclius as a brave and impetuous man of action\textsuperscript{42}? Even our scarce knowledge of what he accomplished during the wars against the Persians, Iberians, and especially the Vandals makes us abstain from uncritically accepting Malchus’ unfavourable view of him.

It cannot be ruled out that Heraclius took care of the memory of himself, to which the fragmentarily preserved encomium found on the papyrus material from Egypt can be considered to bear witness. It is dedicated to a commander whose name is reconstructed as Heraclius. Was this commander the hero of this article? We do not know for sure\textsuperscript{43}.

* * *

Heraclius’ career, the one that can be traced in primary sources, lasted seven years. In its course, he rose to an important position and found himself in the circle of those who enjoyed the trust of the empire’s rulers, Leo I and Zeno, and his family, of whose members nothing is known, was well-off. His greatest victories as

\begin{itemize}
  \item Malchus, 6.2.
  \item Malchus, 6.1. R.C. Blockley (Fragmentary…, vol. II, p. 457, note 12) notes that in describing Heraclius Malchus inspired himself with Thucydides (III, 82, 4).
  \item Malchus, 6.2. Bearing witness to this is the reference, already mentioned in the context of the circumstances of Heraclius’ death, according to which the Goths, by murdering Heraclius, took revenge for his cruelties.
  \item Theophanes, AM 5963.
  \item Leaving aside the question of whom Theophanes and Malchus relied on for their view of Heraclius, it is worth noting that Theophanes presented him from the perspective of what he believed to have been a successful expedition against the Vandals, while Malchus’ perspective was that of Heraclius’ tragic death and his failures in the fight against the Goths.
  \item On this issue, with references to further literature, see Ch. Begass, Die Senatsaristokratie…, p. 143.
\end{itemize}
a commander were those against the Vandals. However, they were eclipsed by his failures in the fight against Theodoric Strabo’s Goths and by the shameful circumstances of his death.  

Translated by Artur Mękarski

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Ioannis Antiocheni Fragmenta quae Supersunt Omnia, ed. S. MARIEV, Berolini–Novi Eboraci 2008 [= Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae, 47].


THEOPHANES, Chronographia, rec. C. DE BOOR, Lipsiae 1883.

Secondary Literature


Heraclius. A Commander in the Service of Leo I and Zeno


PIGOŃSKI Ł., Polityka zachodnia cesarzy Marcjana (450–457) i Leona I (457–474), Łódź 2019 [= Byzantina Lodzienia, 29].


WILCZYŃSKI M., Gejzeryk i „czwarta wojna punicka”, Oświęcim 2016.

WILCZYŃSKI M., Germanie w służbie zachodniorzymskiej w V w. n.e., Oświęcim 2018.

Mirosław J. Leszka

University of Lodz

Faculty of Philosophy and History

Institute of History

Department of Byzantine Studies

ul. Kamińskiego 27a

90-219 Łódź, Polska/Poland

miroslaw.leszka@uni.lodz.pl

© by the author, licensee University of Lodz – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)