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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.

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¹ For the basic information on Heraclius see: J.R. MARTINDALE, *The Prosopography of Later Roman Empire*, vol. II, A.D. 395–527, Cambridge 1980 (cetera: *PLRE*), p. 541–542 (s.v. *Heraclius* 4); F. TINNENFELD, *Heraclius* 6, [in:] *Der Neue Pauly*, vol. V, ed. H. CANKIK, H. SCHNEIDER, Stuttgart 1998, p. 382; Ł. JAROSZ, *Wschodniorzymscy magistrowie militum w latach 395–527 studium prosopograficzne*, Kraków 2017 (unpublished doctoral thesis), p. 201–203; Ch. BEGASS, *Die Senatsaristokratie des oströmischen Reiches, ca. 457–518. Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, München 2018, p. 142–143. Cf. O. SEECK, *Herakleios* 15, [in:] *RE*, vol. VIII, ed. G. WISSOWA, W. KROLL, Stuttgart 1913, col. 503. This scholar claimed (without providing appropriate arguments) that Heraclius was Heraclianus, a honorary comes who participated in the sixth session of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (on the latter – *PLRE* II, p. 540, s.v. *Heraclianus* 4). In the absence of the source material, it is impossible either to prove or to disprove this view.

We have no knowledge of when he was born², but we know where he was from and what his father's name was. According to Theophanes³, his family town was Edessa⁴ and his father, referred to by the chronographer as τοῦ ἀπὸ ὑπάτων, bore the name of Florus⁵. 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 border⁶. 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*⁷. 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; Ł. JAROSZ, *Wschodniorzeczyscy...*, 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 Ἑδεσηνόν 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.

⁶ PRISCUS, *Fragmenta*, 51.1, [in:] *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus. Priscus and Malchus*, vol. II, *Text, Translation and Historiographical Notes*, ed. R.C. BLOCKLEY, Liverpool 1983 (cetera: PRISCUS; the only source that mentions the event); on the date of the event: IDEM, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus. Priscus and Malchus*, vol. I, Liverpool 1981, p. 122, cf. p. 171, note 66; IDEM, *East Roman Foreign Policy. Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius*, Leeds 1992, p. 73–74; G. GREATREX, *Rome and Persia at War, 502–532*, Leeds 1998, p. 126, note 18.

⁷ *PLRE II*, p. 542.

All we know is that it was dropped because of the difficulties encountered in supplying his troops with necessary provisions⁸. 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 forces⁹. 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 Caesarea¹⁰ and the other from Theophanes¹¹, 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 Eusthatus of Epiphany¹². 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 Byzantium¹³. 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 home¹⁴. Where it pertains to Heraclius' participation in the war against the Vandals, Theophanes' account is in some respects different from that of Procopius¹⁵. 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.

⁹ On Basiliscus' expedition see: R. STEINACHER, *Die Vandalen. Aufstieg und Fall eines Barbarenreichs*, Stuttgart 2016, p. 221–225; M. WILCZYŃSKI, *Gejzeryk i „czwarta wojna punicka”*, Oświęcim 2016, p. 175–179; Ł. PIŁGOŃSKI, *Polityka zachodnia cesarzy Marcjana (450–457) i Leona I (457–474)*, Łódź 2019 [= BL, 29], p. 152–163; R.A. BLEEKER, *Aspar and the Struggle for the Eastern Roman Empire, AD 421–71*, London 2022, p. 148–155.

¹⁰ PROCOPIUS, *History of the Wars*, vol. II, *Books III–IV*, III, 6.1–25, ed. H.B. DEWING, New York 1916 [= LCL, 81] (cetera: PROCOPIUS).

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 Jahrhunderts*, 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 Theophaes who in this context mentioned Egypt.

¹⁴ PROCOPIUS, III, 6.25, trans. p. 63.

¹⁵ THEOPHANES, AM 5963.

as his co-commander¹⁶ (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 Leo¹⁷, 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 accounts¹⁸. 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 it¹⁹. 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*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

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.

¹⁷ There is no certainty that the negotiations resulted in signing a peace treaty. On this issue see M. WILCZYŃSKI, *Gejzeryk...*, p. 178.

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. PIKOŃSKI, *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. MODÉLAN, *Les Vandales 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).

¹⁹ Neither PROCOPIOUS (III, 6.25), nor THEOPHANES (AM 5963) wrote about it. They only mentioned that he had been sent by Leo against Gaiseric.

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. Glušanin²¹.

We do not know what role Heraclius played in Leo's bloody crackdown against Aspar, which took place in 471²². 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 473²³ 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 Malchus²⁴, 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 Chersonesos²⁵. Malchus, in turn, claims that some Gothic soldiers took his life in Arcadiopolis in revenge for the cruelties he had committed²⁶. It is hard to say which version is true. More seems to speak in favour of the second one, which is more detailed²⁷. 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 Е.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. PIŁGOŃSKI, *The Shields...*, p. 169–173.

²³ On the agreement that Leo I concluded with Theodoric Strabo – Malchus, 2; cf. for example: Ł. JAROSZ, *Teodoryk Strabon*, ZNUJ.PH 140.3, 2013, p. 219; M. WILCZYŃSKI, *Germanie w służbie zachodniorzymskiej w V w. n.e.*, Oświęcim 2018, p. 410.

²⁴ MALCHUS, *Fragmenta*, 6.2, [in:] *The Fragmentary...*, vol. II (cetera: MALCHUS).

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. WILCZYŃSKI, *Germanie...*, p. 411, note 40.

It is believed that during the campaign against the Goths, Heraclius held the position of *magister militum per Thracias*²⁸. This view is based on the testimony of Malchus and, to some extent, on that of John of Antioch. Malchus referred to Heraclius as strategist²⁹, 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 Θρακίων διέπων Ἡράκλειον 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 Heraclius³⁰.

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 reign³¹, that is after January 474³², 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' conspiracy³³. 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 reign³⁴. The last known *magister militum per Thracias* to serve before Heraclius was Armatius. However, we do not know exactly when Armatius' mission came to an end³⁵.

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

²⁸ PLRE II, p. 542; Ch. BEGASS, *Die Senatsaristokratie...*, p. 143.

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 Θρακίων to Heraclius); JOHN OF ANTIOCH, p. 425, note 1.

³¹ PLRE II, p. 542; Ł. JAROSZ, *Wschodniorzymscy...*, p. 202–203.

³² In all probability, Zeno became co-emperor with his son, Leo II, on 29 January 474 (R. KOSIŃSKI, *Początki kariery Tarasikodissy-Zenona*, [in:] *Byzantina Europea. Księga jubileuszowa ofiarowana Profesorowi Waldemarowi Ceranowi*, ed. M. KOKOSZKO, M.J. LESZKA, Łódź 2007 [= BL, 11], p. 303–304; IDEM, *The Emperor Zeno. Religion and Politics*, Cracow 2010, p. 71–72).

³³ PLRE II, p. 542; Ł. 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 Zeno'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.

³⁵ PLRE II, p. 148; Ch. BEGASS, *Die Senatsaristokratie...*, p. 77–78.

of the Gothic captivity³⁶ 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)³⁷. However, there is no evidence to support this opinion.

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 downfall³⁸. Malchus also hinted that he had been cruel³⁹. Theophanes in turn referred to Heraclius and Marsus as δραστήριοι⁴⁰, which is meant to convey the meaning of both effective and enterprising as well as defiant⁴¹. 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 action⁴²? 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 sure⁴³.

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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

³⁶ MALCHUS, 6.2.

³⁷ C. MANGO, *Deux études sur Byzance et la Perse sassanide. L'inscription historique de Martyropolis. Héraclius, Sahrvaraz et la vraie croix*, TM 9, 1985, p. 113–114.

³⁸ 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).

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ THEOPHANES, AM 5963.

⁴¹ *Słownik grecko-polski*, vol. I, A–Δ, ed. Z. ABRAMOWICZÓWNA, Warszawa 1958, p. 602; cf. 'activity', 'energy' – *LSJ*, p. 448.

⁴² 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.

⁴³ On this issue, with references to further literature, see Ch. BEGASS, *Die Senatsaristokratie...*, p. 143.

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.

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