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NORTHWESTERN COLCHIS IN THE REIGN OF PACORUS¹

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 2nd century AD, five new political entities emerged along the Eastern Black Sea coast, within the territory of historical Colchis. According to Flavius Arrian (ca. 95–175 AD), the southernmost of these was the kingdom of the Macrones and Heniochi. The Laz controlled the central part of Colchis up to the River Egristkali (modern Ghalidzga), while to their north lay the “kingdoms” of the Apsilae, Abasgoi, and Sanigae.

This was the political configuration of the eastern Black Sea region when Pacorus, king of the Laz, appeared on the historical stage. He received his authority from Antoninus Pius (138–161 AD). Given the geopolitical situation in the Black Sea basin, the Laz–Roman alliance strengthened during the reign of Antoninus Pius. As the artifacts discovered in northwestern Colchis indicate, significant transformations took place in the eastern Black Sea region during Pacorus’ rule. This is confirmed by a silver cup with a Greek inscription unearthed in 2005 in an ancient grave at the village of Achmarda in the modern Gagra district. The inscription reads: Ἐγὼ Πάκουρος ὁ βασιλεὺς τοῖς ἀμνοῖς ἔδωκα - “I, King Pacorus, have given [this] to my sheep.”

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The inscription shows that by the mid-2nd century, the Laz king Pacorus had brought the Sanigae confederation under his authority. Naturally, this implies that he had already incorporated the smaller political groups of the Apsilae and Abasgoi into his kingdom earlier.

Thus, Pacorus, the contemporary of Antoninus Pius, whose authority at the time of his accession extended only as far as the River Ghalidzga, succeeded within a short period in incorporating the confederations of the Apsilae, Abasgoi, and Sanigae. He laid the foundation for a powerful western Georgian polity whose northwestern boundary stretched to the River Akheountos (modern Shakhe).

The consequences of Pacorus' activities and the establishment of a unified state in western Georgia are reflected in the Geography of Ptolemy (ca. 100–170 AD). Unlike Arrian, Ptolemy no longer mentions the Apsilae, Abasgoi, or Sanigae in northwestern Colchis. He accurately reflects the new political reality and, throughout the entire eastern Black Sea region—from the province of Cappadocia to Sarmatia—refers to only one political unit: Colchis. It is clear that Ptolemy uses the term “Colchis” out of older tradition, and that in his time it corresponds to the later “Lazica.”

Keywords:

Northwestern Colchis, Sanigs, Pacorus, Lazica, Eastern Black Sea Coast

1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Lazica underwent a challenging and turbulent period over several centuries of its existence. It was established in the eastern Black Sea region, in the historical territory of Colchis, and is regarded as the successor of the ancient Kingdom of Colchis. The political unification of the Laz is first recorded in 131 AD in Flavius Arrian's *Periplus* (Arr., PPE, 11). However, its formation began earlier. We consider that the genesis of the Laz kingdom resulted from the consolidation of the historically established administrative-political entities – *skeptuchia* (*sceptuchies*, Greek: *σκηπτοῦχοι*) that existed in the central regions of Colchis. Lazes, residing in the coastal line, had the closer relationships with Roman Administration. From the beginning of the 2nd century, during the reign of Emperor Trajan (98–117 AD), with Roman sanction, the Laz subjugated the *skeptuchia* of the Manrals and Egres located in the interior of the country. Thus, between 106 and 114 AD, the Kingdom of Lazica emerged from the synoecism of the Laz, Egrian, and Manralian *skeptuchia* (Pipia, 2012: 42-55). This is to some extent confirmed by the accounts of Claudius Ptolemy (*Geogr.* V.9.5) and the *Armenian Geography* (Armenian..., 1877: 38-39).

Initially, the Kingdom of Lazica encompassed the central part of Colchis, on both sides of the Rioni River, from the land of the Zidrites to the river Egristskali (in Georgian the river Egrisi; modern Ghalidzga) (Lomouri, 1997: 18; Muskhelishvili, 1977: 106-113; Muskhelishvili, 2003: 108). As for the southern and northwestern regions of historical Colchis, according to the same Arrian, the situation was as follows. To the south, Lazica bordered the province of the Zidrites, which was under the authority of the Iberian king Pharsmanes II (Arr., PPE, 11). The Zidrites occupied approximately the territory of modern Adjara–Kobuleti (Lomouri, 1968: 8-10). To their south, there was a strong union of the Macron-Heniochi people. They controlled part of what is today Chanica, roughly centered near the town of Atina (Janashia, 1959: 22; Pipia, 2024: 56-57). Meanwhile, the northwestern part of historical Colchis was held by the unions of the Apsilae, Abasgia, and Sanigae (Arr., PPE 11). This was the situation on the eastern Black Sea coast in 131 AD, at the time of Flavius Arrian's journey.

These new political formations that emerged on the territory of historical Colchis were officially designated as “*socii et amici populi Romani*” (“allies and friends of the Roman people”). However, the actual power of these kings was minimal: they were entirely under Roman control, and their supposed “friendship” and “alliance” were largely nominal. From a

military perspective, all these "kingdoms" in Colchis were incorporated into a unified defensive system along Rome's eastern frontier and were supervised by Roman garrisons stationed at Apsaros, Phasis and Sebastopolis (Pipia, 2005: 118-126).

2. Research methodology

The work is based on research methods proven in modern historical science. In particular, The research process used the method of historical-source analysis and hermeneutics of sources, which implies a comprehensive detailed study of sources, their mutual reconciliation and interpretation; The work uses the Historical-comparative analysis method, observation method, logical, analytical, inductive and deductive methods; as well as a pragmatic methodology for establishing the interdependence and interconnection of events in a specific historical period.

3. Results and Discussion

In 131 AD, the king of the Laz was Malasa, who, according to Arrian, had received his authority from Emperor Hadrian. During Malasa's reign, the northwestern border of Lazica extended only as far as the Egristskali (modern-day Ghalidzga) (Arr., PPE, 11). After Malasa, King Pacorus ascended the Lazic throne. His reign begins with the second phase of the Laz kingdom's history, a period of rise and strengthening. It is documented that during the reign of King Pacorus, Lazica initiated successful northwestern expansions and the incorporation of other western Georgian territories adjacent to Lazica. When and under what conditions did Lazic hegemony extend over northwestern Colchis, which circumstances contributed to its rise and territorial expansion, and what were the main trends in the kingdom's development during Pacorus' reign? In the presented report, we will try to answer these questions and show the objective historical reality, which led to the formation of a unified Lazic state in the territory of Western Georgia.

Pacorus, the king of the Laz, was a contemporary of Emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD). As evidenced by the account of Julius Capitolinus, it was Antoninus Pius who “gave Pacorus to the Laz as their king” (“Pacorum regem Lazii dedit” - Jul. Capit., Anton. Pius, IX, 6-9). We have had the opportunity to examine in detail this account of Julius Capitolinus and

suggest that the transfer of authority to Pacorus by Antoninus Pius is likely to have taken place between AD 141 and 144 (Pipia, 2002: 18-24).

During the reign of Pacorus, the alliance between Laz and Rome was strengthened. For the ruling circles of Lazica, Roman support was essential in the context of the growing power and aggressiveness of neighboring Iberia. For the Empire, it was likewise advantageous to use the militarily capable 'kingdom' of Lazi to restrain Iberia, which had invaded its subject territory of the Zidrites and was focused on further territorial expansion. According to Roman doctrine, the Lazic army, in coordination with the Roman garrisons stationed at Phasis, could counter Iberia's aggressive policies along the Black Sea coast and control the passes of the northern Caucasus (Pipia, 2005: 140-142).

During the reign of Antoninus Pius, Roman influence was actively increased in the Black Sea region. As the dynamics of the event's development show, Pacorus skillfully uses Rome's regional interests, considers the priorities of Antoninus Pius' eastern policy, and, with Roman approval, exercises authority over the separate "kingdoms" in northwestern Colchis and establishes a unified state. Based on archaeological material discovered in recent times, it is now possible to determine the specific period of the northwestward expansion of the Laz borders and to provide a scientific reconstruction of particular episodes connected to this historical occurrence.

In 2005, during excavations in the village of Achmarda in the Gagra district, a silver cup was found in the inventory of an ancient tomb, bearing the Greek inscription: Ἐγὼ Πάκουρος ὁ βασιλεὺς τοῖς ἀμνοῖς ἔδωκα "I, King Pacorus, gave [to] my sheep." There are no direct analogues to this formulation in Greek epigraphy. It appears to be of Eastern origin and reflects the model of the king's relationship with his subjects: the king is the shepherd, and the subordinates are the sheep (Vinogradov, 2013: 55-56; Dundua, 2017: 119-124).

Undoubtedly, the Pacorus mentioned in the Achmarda inscription was the king of the Laz. At the time of his accession, King Pacorus's authority extended only as far as the Ghalidzga River. However, he soon came to regard the tribes living west of the Bzipi River as his "sheep," that is, as his subjects. According to Flavius Arrian, the Apsilae and Abazgi were settled between the Ghalidzga River and Sebastopolis. At the same time, the territory from Sebastopolis to the Acheunt River (modern Shakhe River) was under the control of the Sanigae "kingdom" (Arrian., PPE, 11, 18). Thus, in this period, the area of the Achmarda tomb fell within the settlement zone

of the Sanigae. The resulting picture is clear: King Pacorus subordinated the Apsilae, Abazgi, and Sanigae to his authority and laid the foundations of a strong western Georgian polity whose north-western border extended to the Acheunt River.

We believe that Pacorus initially subdued, by his own forces, the weak political unions of the Apsilae and Abazgi in north-western Colchis. The union of the Sanigs, however, was relatively strong, and Lazic hegemony over it was established later, after the Rome–Lazica military alliance had come into effect. This is directly indicated by the fact that, at this time, a relatively strong Roman garrison of 200–300 soldiers was stationed in Sebastopolis (Pipia, 2005: 145-149). Naturally, without Roman permission, Pacorus could not have extended his authority over the union of the Sanigae, which was under the control of Sebastopolis. Moreover, the Laz operated in north-western Colchis in tandem with the Romans. This is clearly shown by the coincidence in time between Pacorus's annexation of the Sanigian lands and the appearance of a Roman garrison in the far north-western part of Colchis. It is known that during the reign of Antoninus Pius, the Roman frontier advanced northwestward, and legionary units were also deployed in Pityus. Epigraphic material discovered in the territory of Pityus attests that by 152 AD a Roman garrison was already stationed there. A Latin inscription preserved on a limestone slab mentions the consuls of 152 AD, Glabrio and Homullus (Speidel, Todua, 1988: 56-58). During the reign of Antoninus Pius, Roman activity in the extreme north-western part of Colchis is clearly visible in the archaeological record. By the mid-2nd century, the presence of a Roman garrison in Pityus is further confirmed by medallions discovered in the settlement area, bearing the names of Antoninus Pius (138–161 AD) and Lucilla, which belonged to Roman legionaries. Moreover, it is from the reign of Antoninus Pius that the widespread distribution of imported goods and Roman coins begins in the territory of Pityus. The construction of the fortress in Pityus is believed to have begun in the mid-2nd century AD. Although the main structures within the citadel were built at the end of the 2nd century AD, urban development and construction activity in the city had already started in the mid-2nd century (Lordkipanidze, 1991: 100-101; Pipia, 2005: 147-148).

Based on all of the above, it is evident that these two significant events: the deployment of Roman military units to Pityus and Pacorus's subjugation of the Gagra-Bichvinta sector are interconnected. Thus, the northwestward movement of Roman troops and the

expansion of Lazic hegemony in this direction were two components of a single process, the result of coordinated Roman-Lazic action.

The results of Pacorus's activity and his incorporation of the north-western regions of Colchis are reflected in the Geographical Handbook of Claudius Ptolemy (c. 100–170 AD). It is known that Ptolemy drew on the reports of Pliny (23/24–79 AD) and Flavius Arrian (c. 95–175 AD); nevertheless, he presents a different picture of the eastern Black Sea region. According to Ptolemy, the Laz controlled the entire coastline of Colchis, while the extreme north-western part of Colchis was inhabited by the Suano–Colchian tribe (Cl. Ptol., Geogr., V, 8, 25). Thus, unlike Arrian and Pliny, Claudius Ptolemy no longer mentions the Apsilae, Abazgi, or Sanigae in north-western Colchis. He accurately reflects the new political reality, referring to a single political entity—Colchis—across the entire Eastern Black Sea region up to Sarmatia; from the province of Cappadocia to the Bzyb (Bzipi) River. It is evident that Ptolemy employs the name "Colchis" under the influence of earlier tradition, and that it corresponds to the later "Lazica." As for the Suano–Colchians, who replace Arrian's Sanigs, this term has an ethno-political significance. It refers to the Svans (or Sans) living within the territory of the Colchian (Lazic) kingdom (Pipia, 2025: 48).

After the incorporation of north-western Colchis and the restoration of Colchis's historical borders in this direction, Pacorus apparently initiated large-scale measures to secure these frontiers. This problem had already confronted the earlier Colchian kingdom. Historically, Colchis lacked a stable opponent on its north-western frontier and was not bordered there by any unified political entity. Instead, the Colchians faced strong but less developed nomadic unions, naturally attracted by the wealth of Colchis's fertile regions. The piratical raids of the highlanders in the western Caucasus and their almost constant pressure on Colchis's northwestern border have historically posed a significant threat. Along this section of the frontier, the Colchians were compelled to maintain a permanently active defensive posture. At the height of Colchis's power, its kings sought to push the borders of the kingdom further to the north-west, at the expense of the lands of the Heniochi and Achaian tribes, in order to curb the piratical raids of the nomads (Pipia, 2023: 64-70). In this respect, Pacorus continued the traditional policy of the Colchian kings.

In this context, another artifact discovered in the north-western Caucasus, at Maykop, is particularly noteworthy. A silver cup found there bears the inscription: "from King Pacorus."

(Trever, 1953: 243). The style and formula of the Maykop inscription closely resemble the technique and, above all, the material and typology of the Achmarda cup inscription. Both were engraved on wine vessels of the same type. Accordingly, attributing these two cups to the same individual is not difficult, especially since palaeographic analysis dates the Maykop inscription to the second half of the 2nd century AD, which coincides with the period of King Pacorus's reign over the Laz kingdom (Pipia, Kobakhidze, Dundua, 2023: 170-177).

4. Conclusion

As a result of the research, we came to the conclusion that King Pacorus subjugated the political unions in north-western Colchis. In the second half of the 2nd century AD, he sent a silver cup, bearing the inscription "I, King Pacorus, gave [this] to my sheep," to his subordinates living beyond the Bzipi River, in the territory of what is now the Gagra district. In the same period, Pacorus maintained active diplomatic relations with the North Caucasian tribes, sending them gifts, including a silver cup. Unlike the Achmarda cup, however, this vessel was a diplomatic gift and was not intended for his subjects. Consequently, only Pacorus's name appears on the cup, without the dedication "to my sheep."

Thus, as a result of King Pacorus's energetic policies, the north-western part of historical Colchis was incorporated into the Lazic (Egrisi) state, the successor of ancient Colchis, and remained an integral part of it throughout the entire Late Antique period.

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Illustrations







The silver jug from the Achmarda necropolis²

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