



The strategic significance of Cyprus at the first half of 7th century CE

VII. Yüzyılın İlk Yarısında Kıbrıs'ın Stratejik Önemi

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Öz

Tarih boyunca, Kıbrıs Doğu Akdeniz'in komşu bölgelerine uzanan kültürel ve ekonomik iletişimin bir basamak taşı olarak düşünülmüştür. Kıbrıs'ın lokalizasyonun önemi genellikle kültürel ve ticari alışveriş açısından ele alınmıştır. 7. yüzyılın ilk yarısında Kıbrıs'ın Yakın Doğu'daki stratejik önemi açıkça bilinmektedir. Ada üzerindeki Mısır'ın kısmi kontrolü bulunmaktaydı, bu nedenle bu bölgenin savunulması imkansız olmasa bile oldukça zordu. Bu çalışma, 7. yüzyılın ilk yarısında adanın askeri önemine dikkat çekmek için hazırlanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tarihçe, Kıbrıs; Bizans – Sasan Savaşı; Stratejik Önem; Doğu Akdeniz.

Abstract

Cyprus has always been perceived as a stepping-stone of cultural and economic communication joining various areas of East Mediterranean. The Location of Cyprus is usually dealt with in terms of cultural and trade exchange. In first half of 7th century CE the strategic significance of Cyprus on Near East was clearly highlighted. Even partial control over the Island, isolated Egypt, thus making the defense of this province extremely difficult unless impossible. This report is to draw attention to the military importance of the island in the first half of 7th century CE.

Keywords: *History, Cyprus; Byzantine–Sasanian War; strategic significance; East Mediterranean.*

Introduction

Cyprus, the third largest island of the Mediterranean is located on the sailing route between South Coast of Asia Minor with Syria, Palestine and Egypt. The island has always been perceived as a stepping-stone of cultural and economic communication joining various areas of East Mediterranean.¹ The Location of Cyprus is usually dealt with in terms of cultural and trade

¹ Mango, 1976: 3-13; Zavagno, 2011: 448-93.

exchange.² This report is to draw attention to the military importance of the island in the first half of 7th century CE. The article consists of three parts. First one being a historical outline of Cyprus in the Roman period and following two regard the main idea of the article. In first half of 7 c. CE the events took place in Near East which provide meaningful also for the history of Europe. The late Roman (early Byzantine) period came to an end³ as a result of the war between last two great empires of antiquity: the Eastern Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran, waged 603-628.⁴ The war which proved so devastating for both sides that allowed the Arabs conquering Iran, Levant, North Africa and, after few decades, also Spain.⁵ In context of these events, one should point out the military activities, often neglected, in which Cyprus played a crucial role. The first was capturing of the island by Nicetas in 610, the second was capturing of Cyprus by *kust-ī nēmrōz spāhbed* Šahrbarāz⁶ in 617.

Author believes that these two events played the key role for the power layout in the Near East, during the last great war of Antiquity. In the first case the actions of Nicetas enable capturing the power in Byzantium by Heraclius at the same time slowing down Persian expansion. In the second case capturing Cyprus by Šahrbarāz was a condition of capturing Egypt by the Persians in second decade of 7th century.

Roman Cyprus

Cyprus became a Roman province in 58 BCE.⁷ From 22 BCE Cyprus was a senatorial province divided into four districts with the capitals in: Paphus, Salamis, Amathus and Lapethus.⁸ There were two major riots on the Island in

² Ammianus Marcellinus, XIV 8. 14-15; Papacostas, 2001: 107-28; Pieri, 2012: 27-49; Zavagno, 2017.

³ Frendo, 1988-91: 1-23.

⁴ Kaegi, 2003: 39-57, 65-9, 74-99, 122-74; Howard-Johnston, 2006: 1-22; Dignas, Winter, 2007: 115-118; Maksymiuk, 2015: 86-98.

⁵ Kaegi, 2010.

⁶ Ṭabarī lists three commanders of Xusrō II Parvēz active on the Western front. Rumiyūzān was sent to Syria and Palestine, Šāhēn was to capture Egypt and the lands of Nubia, the third was Farruhān (Farrukhān). According to Ṭabarī Farruhān „was of Šahrwarāz rank” and led the expedition against Constantinople [*The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, tr. C. E. Bosworth (New York 1999) 1002. Thereafter Ṭabarī]. As far as identity of Šāhēn is clear, identification of the remaining commanders is disputable. It is believed that Rumiyūzān should be identified with Šahrbarāz who undoubtedly captured Jerusalem in 614. Bosworth in his comment to Ṭabarī identifies Šahrbarāz with Rumiyūzān and Farruhān (Ṭabarī 1002, 318-9, note 745, note 749). Basing on Sebeos [115], Thomson (Sebeos, 63, note 391) assumes that the commanders listed in Armenian sources: Razmiozan and Khoream, are in fact Šahrbarāz; Based on the studies of R. Gyselen [2001, seal 2d/2, seal 2d/1, seal 2d/2] it should be assumed that Šahrbarāz was the member of the Mehrān family (Pahlav) and held the office of *kust ī nēmrōz spāhbed*. P. Pourshariati [2008: 142-149] has no doubts that Gorāz (Gurāz) mentioned in the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī must be identified with Šahrbarāz (“boar of the empire”)

⁷ Badian, 1965: 110-21; Mitford, 1980: 1285-384.

⁸ Talbert, 1985: 156-7.

course of the Roman reign. The first was *Tumultus Iudaicus* (115-117),⁹ the mutiny under leadership of Artemion. According to Roman sources, the Jews destroyed the capital of the island of Salamis¹⁰ and slew 240,000 Greeks. The revolt was ended by the Roman armed intervention, followed by the restrictive regulations directed against the Jews.¹¹ The second intervention of the Roman army in Cyprus took place during the revolt of Calocaerus (proclaiming himself emperor), in 334. His revolt was quickly defeated by Flavius Dalmatius, and the usurper was executed, being burned alive.¹²

At the end of the 4th century, the Roman province of Cyprus, was included in the Diocese of the Orient, as a part of the Prefecture of Orient (which included Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Cilicia, Isauria and Arabia). The capital of the diocese was at Antioch on the Orontes (in Syria), and its governor had the special title of *comes Orientis*.¹³ Later, with the reform of the provincial organization by Justinian I (r. 527-565) on May 18, 536 CE, the island became part of the *quaestura exercitus* (which included Moesia Secunda, Scythia Minor, Caria, the Cyclades, and Cyprus).¹⁴ Cyprus was detached from the praetorian prefecture of the Orient and placed under the authority of a new official, the *quaestor* of the army.¹⁵ Subduing Cyprus to military command placed in Odessus (present-day Varna),¹⁶ linked the island with Danube region instead Syria, which was the case until that time.¹⁷ Justinian's intention was securing defenses of the Balkan Provinces which were supplied mainly by the sea.¹⁸

Occupation of Cyprus by Nicetas

The murder of emperor Maurice (r. 582-602)¹⁹ served as a pretext for the Iranians to instigate military actions against the Byzantines. The *šāhānšāh* Xusrō II Parvēz (r. 590-628), whom the emperor Maurice had helped to the throne,²⁰ launched a campaign against Armenia and Mesopotamia.²¹ He

⁹ Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, IV 2; Fuks, 1961: 98-104; Smallwood, 2001: 389-427; Kapera, 2011: 179-96; Horbury, 2014: 164-89.

¹⁰ Orosius, *Historiarum adversus paganos*, VII 12; Probably Salamis was destroyed due the earthquake in 115 CE. Salamis was restored by Hadrian (r. 117-138) in 123 CE. The coins with legend "[father] and benefactor", see Pouilloux, Roesch, Marcillet-Jaubert, 1987: 62.

¹¹ *Cassii Dionis Cocceiani historiarum Romanarum*, LXVIII 32. 2-3; Of course the number of 240,000 dead Greeks seems to be an exaggeration.

¹² Aurelius Victor, *Liber de Caesaribus*, 41, 11; Hill 1940: 244; Salamon, 1984: 79-85.

¹³ Zavagno, 2017: 66.

¹⁴ Koehn, 2018: 34-5.

¹⁵ Haldon, 1999: 68; Lee, 2005: 120; Wiewiórowski, 2006: 317-40.

¹⁶ Velkov, 1977: 62.

¹⁷ Probably to protect the northern flank of Constantinople and the Balkan peninsula; Morrison, Sodini, 2002: 171.

¹⁸ Whitby, 2001: 293.

¹⁹ Liebeschuetz, 2003: 255.

²⁰ Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae*, VIII 15.7; In 589 CE the commander of the Iranian army, Bahrām Čōbīn, rebelled against Hormozd IV [Tyler-Smith, 2004: 33-65; Pourshariati, 2008: 128-30]. The king was murdered and his son Xusrō II (r. 590-628) sought help with the Roman emperor. Joint armies defeated Bahrām Čōbīn in the battle of 591 CE on the river Blarathos in Atropatene.

reached the Euphrates, conquering within several years the following strongholds in border zone (604-607).²² Heraclius and his father, Heraclius the Elder, the *exarch* of Africa, led a revolt against the unpopular usurper Phocas (r. 602-610), in September 608.²³ However Cyrenaica fell easily, and Nicetas' deputy Bonakis was sent against Egypt with 3,000 Byzantines and many more Berber auxiliaries (early Spring of 609), which enable victory in the battle before Alexandria and entering Egypt.²⁴ The resistance in Egypt was strong. The garrisons at Semanub and Athrib remained faithful to Phocas, also the troops from Palestine commanded by *comes Orientis* Bonosus were relocated to Egypt.²⁵ He defeated, captured and executed Bonakis and several leading figures who had supported the rebellion.²⁶ In Alexandria herself the factional fighting burst between the Blues (who supported Phocas) and the Greens (who supported the rebellion), which enforced Nicetas to go to the city.²⁷ In early Spring of 610 Bonosus left Egypt and went to Constantinople.²⁸

Byzantine situation became critical in 610. On August 7, 610 Iranian *kust-ī nēmrōz spāhbed* Šahrbarāz, crossed the Euphrates; he rapidly took the fortress of Zenobia and Hierapolis.²⁹ Iranian armies entered Syria almost without any resistance.

The only chance for the Empire was, in that situation, quick ending of the civil war. Heraclius's younger cousin Nicetas captured the port of Alexandretta (Alexandria ad Issum) and Cyprus, regarded as an ideal naval base for the final assault on Constantinople.³⁰ The fact of capturing Cyprus by Nicetas is confirmed by the series of coins struck in the name of Heraclius,³¹ as well as inscription of Heraclius at the aqueduct (Salamis-Constantia), which can be dated to 610: "Ε|γένο|ντο σὺν Θ(ε)ῶ Κ(α)ὶ αὐτὰ ἐ αἰπτὰ ἀψίδες ἐκ τῶν φιλοτιμηθέντων παρὰ Φλ(αβίου) Ἡρακλίου τοῦ θεοσοέπτου ἡμῶν δεσπότου ἀπὸ τοῦ ἵπποδρου. Μη(νὸς) ς', ἰ(νδικιῶνς) δ'". [Were made, with the help of God, these seven arches, also thanks to generosity of Fl(avius) Heraclius, our ruler crowned by God, from the hippodrome the sixth month, 4th indiction].³²

²¹ Olster, 1993: 81-100.

²² In Mesopotamia: Dara (604), Amida (606), Edessa (609) and Circesium (610); in Armenia: Angl (605), Theodosiopolis and Citharizon (607).

²³ Mitchell, 2007: 411.

²⁴ John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, 107; Butler, 1978: 8-20; Arena, 2012: 96-129.

²⁵ Discussion in Booth, 2012: 582-8.

²⁶ John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, 107-109.

²⁷ Stratos, 1968: 85-6.

²⁸ John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, 109; Kaegi, 2003: 44-5.

²⁹ *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6096; Howard-Johnston, 1995: 157-226; Foss, 2003: 151-2.

³⁰ Discussion in Kaegi, 2003: 86-9; Zavagno [2011: 452], informs that Cyprus was captured by Heraclius, but undoubtedly Zavagno must have meant not the emperor to be in person but acting on his behalf Nicetas. Arena [2012: 125] states that the possible route of Heraclius to Constantinople.

³¹ Foss, 2008: 6-7; Metcalf, 2009: 159-62. On general information of the Byzantine coins in the Near East (608-619), see Hendy, 2008: 415- 416.

³² Chrysos, 1984: 53-64; According to Sodini 1988: 619-38], possible construction date of the Aqueduct is year 610, however generally, the Author prefers the dating of

A Jewish revolt, in September, burst out in Antioch,³³ Tyre and Acre. The Jews of Tyre were massacred in reprisal³⁴ which did not improve military situation of Byzantium. Antioch, the capital of the diocese of Orient and the greatest city of Roman Syria, surrendered to the Persians on 8 October 610.³⁵

The occupation of Cyprus by Nicetas enabled Heraclius ceasing the power in Constantinople (cut the grain supply from Egypt to the capital). On October 5, 610, Heraclius was crowned emperor by the Patriarch Sergius in the Chapel of St. Stephen.³⁶ From strategic point of view Nicetas impeded the progress of Iranian army by capturing of Cyprus. Cyprus had control over the islands and access to Syria, which had almost entirely fallen into Persians hands, and Egypt by sea. The commander of the Northern Iranian army, Šāhēn, captured without difficulty Caesarea in Cappadocia in 611.³⁷ After one year long siege of the city by Priscus, Iranian units managed to withdraw to Armenia, in Summer 612.³⁸

Occupation of Cyprus by Šahrbarāz

In 613 the Roman offensive pressed on into Syria, but the combined armies under Šāhēn and Šahrbarāz defeated Byzantine forces under Heraclius and Nicetas near Antioch.³⁹ Iranians captured Tarsos and further to the north large parts of Cilicia as well.⁴⁰ Capturing Cilicia blocked land connection between Constantinople (and Anatolia) and Syria, Palestina and Egypt. Next, Iranian armies, almost without resistance captured Syrian cities of Apamea, Emessa and Damascus.⁴¹ At the break of 613/614 the armies of Xusrō II with active support of Jews⁴² captured Jerusalem. Several months later a mutiny of the Christians broke during which Nehemiah was murdered.⁴³ The Jews requested support from Šahrbarāz, who stationed in Caesarea Maritima. In the second half of April 614, the Iranian army besieged Jerusalem and after about 20 days re-captured the city.⁴⁴ According literary description Jerusalem

the first inscriptions to 619; According to Kaegi [2003: 208] the inscription was erected later, probably in 631.

³³ A pogrom in Antioch in 608 would lead to a Jewish revolt. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6101, The (corrupted) text of Theophanes reports a major riot; Frenzo, 1982: 202-4; Dagron, Déroche, 1991: 19-22; Jackson Bonner, 2019: 407.

³⁴ Neusner, 1970: 122.

³⁵ Sebeos 111; 114; *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6102; Morony 1987: 87-95.

³⁶ *Chronicon Paschale*, 699; Haldon, 1990: 41-2.

³⁷ *Vie de Théodore de Sykéon*, ch. 153.

³⁸ Sebeos 113; *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6103.

³⁹ Sebeos 114-115; Kaegi, 2003: 75-7.

⁴⁰ Sebeos 115.

⁴¹ On the chronology, see: Greatrex, Lieu, 2002: 301, note 58.

⁴² On the Jewish collaboration with the Persians, see Schick, 1995: 26-31.

⁴³ Antiochos Strategos, 502-17; Sebeos 115.

⁴⁴ Antiochos Strategos 503-505; Sebeos 115; Ṭabarī 1007; Discussion of dating in Ben-Ami, Tchekhanovets, Bijovsky, 2010: 204-21; Stoyanov, 2011: 351-8; According to classical sources its christian inhabitants were slaughtered (Antiochos Strategos 506-507; Sebeos 115), Avni [2010: 35-48] dates 7 group grave located by Mamilla

was to be demolished which has been partially confirmed by the recent archaeological survey.⁴⁵ From the ideological perspective the key event was carrying the relics of the True Cross from Jerusalem by Šahrbarāz.⁴⁶

According to Arabic sources Šahrbarāz defeated the Byzantine army between Adhri'at and Bostra (or Busra al-Sham) in 614 (?).⁴⁷ Nicetas attempted to stop the Persian invasion in Syro-Palestine. However after the victory over the Persians near Emesa, in 614, which inflicted large losses⁴⁸ he withdrew to Africa, to prepare the defense of Egypt.

At the same time the army commanded by Šāhēn, reached Chalcedon on the Bosphorus going through Ephesus (the city was destroyed in 614),⁴⁹ reached Chalcedon on the Bosphorus. Heraclius asked for peace, at the same time directing the forces at the back of Šāhēn.⁵⁰ After rejection of the proposal of negotiations by Xusrō II,⁵¹ Iranian armies captured Chalcedon at the break of 615/616.⁵²

The only reference to a possible Persian occupation of Cyprus is mentioned in the *Life of St. John the Almsgiver*.⁵³

“Now a general, one Aspagurius* by name, had been sent to Constantia in Cyprus but had not been admitted by the town; so he prepared himself for war against its citizens and they on their side were arming themselves against him. And they were just on the point of engaging in this slaughter of each other when the all-admirable John, the disciple of the God of Peace, intervened and induced both parties to seek reconciliation and succeeded in bringing them to terms.”⁵⁴

The text does not clarify whether Aspagourios was a Persian⁵⁵ or a Byzantine commander.⁵⁶ There is no firm evidence that there was any Persian

pool for the time of Iranian invasion; On top of that 35 thousand, including Patriarch Zachariah were to be deported to Iran (Antiochos Strategos 511-514; Sebeos 116).

⁴⁵ Alternative view Magness [1992: 67-74] who states that the destruction within the city come from the later periods. The problem in their dating is the earthquake of 628 i and Arab invasion of 638.

⁴⁶ Antiochos Strategos 515-516; *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6106; Ṭabarī 1002; Maksymiuk, 2017: 109-25.

⁴⁷ Ṭabarī 1007; Qur'ān 30, *Sūrat al-Rūm*, v. 2-4; The Arabic sources do not specify a date; discussion in El-Awaisi, 2015: 1-32.

⁴⁸ Agapius, 450.

⁴⁹ *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6107; Sebeos 123; Ṭabarī 1002.

⁵⁰ Sebeos 122; *Chronicon Paschale*, 708-709.

⁵¹ Sebeos 113; *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, XI 1.

⁵² *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6108-6109.

⁵³ Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria. from 610 to 619; Rapp, 2004: 121-134; di Berardino, 2008: 402.

⁵⁴ *Life of John the Almsgiver*, 13.

⁵⁵ Foss, 1975: 724, note 2; Greatrex, Lieu, 2002: 305, note 103.

⁵⁶ Martindale, 1992: 137; Kaegi, 2003: 93; On Persians in Byzantine army see Heil, 2006: 143-79, esp. 167; According to Grierson [1950: 71-93] Aspagourios was an officer of Nicetas, and that the episode dates to the Heraclian revolt in 609/610.

fleet at that time.⁵⁷ Another problem is the character of the unrest in Cyprus, which were to be soothed down by the patriarch of Alexandria, John the Almsgiver, in course of mediation between the inhabitants and Aspagourios. Undoubtedly Aspagourios is a Persian name.⁵⁸ Based on information of the *Chronicle 724* and Theophanes stating that the Persians invaded Rhodes in 625,⁵⁹ it is possible to conclude that the Persian employed the fleet few years earlier.⁶⁰ V. Dimitrev's supposition that the Persian army was transported to the islands on former Byzantine vessels captured in imperial ports (either Antioch or Alexandria) or build especially for the Iranians in Egyptian or Syrian yards, should be agreed with.⁶¹

A. Stewart firmly rejects possibility of Persian intervention arguing that the conflict regarded religious quarrels among the inhabitants of the Island.⁶² This is not conclusive argument because high ranking Christian clergymen carried negotiations with Persian invaders many times.⁶³

Considering above doubts, it should be stated that there is no sufficient evidence to refute the idea of the armies of Šahrbarāz on Cyprus in 617. The possible Persian assault on the Island should be perceived in context of strategic military Operations of Persian army this year. The army of Šāhēn stationed in Chalcedon, Xusrō II rejected the peace negotiations so it was clear that warfare would continue. The *šāhānšāh* did not drive towards capturing Constantinople. Iranian forces were concentrated on attacking Egypt, the richest province of the Byzantine empire, and capturing of this "Empire's bread-basket" was main goal of Xusrō. It is difficult to assume that Šahrbarāz would not attempt to took over control over, at least part of Cyprus.⁶⁴ If we consider that before attacking Syro-Palestine, Persian army captured so-called Cilician Gates, i.e. the only land passage which could allow Byzantine army attacking operating Iranians from the back, it seems obvious that the actions of Persian commanders served well-designed strategic goals. The situation in Cyprus made the defensive efforts of Nicetas in Egypt more difficult, assuming his communication with Heraclius.⁶⁵ Only after securing the sea route through Cyprus, Šahrbarāz could initiate, eventually successful, invasion on Egypt in 618, passing by Pelusium.⁶⁶

⁵⁷ About a Sasanian naval force as far back as Ardashir I, see Iranian military historians: Raeen, 1350/1972: 287; Nourbaksh, 1382/2003; Jalali, 1383/2004: 18; Farrokh, 2017: 137-140.

⁵⁸ Foss, 1975: 724; Chrysos, 1993: 13; Mango, 1984: 25-41.

⁵⁹ *Chronicon Miscellaneum ad AD 724 pertinens*, 5-24; *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, AM 6111; Greatrex, Lieu, 2002: 199.

⁶⁰ "Evidence for Sasanian activity along the Aegean coast is also provided by a hoard of coins discovered on the island of Samos, probably buried in 623." Greatrex, Lieu, 2002: 197.

⁶¹ Dimitriev, 2017: 735-736.

⁶² Stewart, 2013: 300-2.

⁶³ Maksymiuk, 2018: 47-8.

⁶⁴ Greatrex, Lieu, 2002: 196.

⁶⁵ Crawford 2013: 48.

⁶⁶ Frendo, 1988-91: 11-13; Butler, 1978: 69-92; Altheim-Stiehl, 1992: 87-96; Altheim-Stiehl, 1991: 3-16.

Conclusion

In first half of 7th century CE the strategic significance of Cyprus on Near East was clearly highlighted. The occupation of Cyprus by Nicetas enabled Heraclius taking over the power in Constantinople. The island became the shelter from Iranian assault with ravaged Eastern provinces of Byzantine Empire. At the same time being the main point of communication between Constantinople and Egypt. From strategic point of view, Nicetas, capturing Cyprus, impeded the progress of Iranian army. Although the sources are not fully clear, it must be assumed that Šahrbarāz on the way to Egypt first had to take of Cyprus, which resulted from the strategic significance of the island as maritime hub.⁶⁷ Even partial control over the Island, after earlier capturing of Syro-Palestine isolated Egypt, thus making the defense of this province extremely difficult unless impossible.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Zavagno, 2011: 448-83.

⁶⁸ What points out in the context of the Arab conquest Kaegi, 1995: 18.

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