FASCICULI ARCHAEOLOGIAE HISTORICAE
FASC. XVI-XVII, PL ISSN 0860-0007

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SIEGE AND CITY DEFENCE OF THE GOTHS FROM THE MID-3RD TO THE 5TH CENTURIES A.D.

The materials on which this paper is based are drawn from the authors of Late Antiquity. For the third century our principal source is the *Scythica*, written by the Greek historian and politician Dexippus, now lost and only preserved in fragments. Additional material is derived from the *Getica* of the Gothic writer Jordanes. The Roman historian and soldier Ammianus Marcellinus informs us about events of the last quarter of the 4th century. The most important sources for events of the 5th century are the *New History* of Zosimus and the works of the Bishop Sidonius Apollinarius. The testimony of other authors is less important.

The Goths, like other forest peoples, were not skilful city-builders. Within the *Barbaricum* the siege of fortified cities was not normal practice. Villages did exist, with both natural and man-made defences, such as Gorodok and Alexandrovka in the Chernjahov Culture[1]. In the mid-3rd century, during the period of the so-called Gothic Wars, the Goths as a rule only captured unfortified villages[2]. Sieges of cities were rare[3]. The accounts of the sieges of Marcianopolis, Philippopolis and Side, dealt with below, were only preserved in military treatises because they were unusual.

In 248 the Goths advanced to Marcianopolis, a strategic city in Lower Moesia[4]. The Goths decided to take the city by storm, not to lay siege to it for reasons of time. They collected a lot of stones for the storm, and then began the assault, throwing javelins, arrows and stones with their hands. The defenders, protected by the city walls and by their shields, did not shoot back. The Goths retreated when their missiles were exhausted. The aim of the besieging forces had been to force away the defenders from the top of the wall with their intense barrage of missiles, meanwhile preventing them from shooting back. The Goths tended to capture towns with barrage assaults such as this, but in this case they were repulsed.

A few days later the Goths prepared a new storm along the whole perimeter of the city walls. They advanced towards it in deep columns. For their part the townspeople effectively defended themselves by throwing stones and other missiles. The Goth formations suffered heavy casualties, and it was decided to end the siege[5].

This unsuccessful attempt to capture a city presents us with some of the skills the Goths applied in order to capture cities. They did not seek to establish a permanent blockade but rather hoped to seize the city by a general storm, this being the simplest and quickest method by which to capture a city. The besiegers tended to be successful when they attempted to capture a city in this way, thanks to the intensity of their shooting, but their losses were heavy[6]. The Goths did not use siege-machines, but it cannot be ruled out that they

[1] B. V. Magomedov, *Chernjakhovskaja kultura Severo-Zapadneogo Prichernomorja*, Kiev 1987 pp. 27-9 (in Russian).

[2] Zosimus, I. 26.1; 33.1-2; 43.2.

[3] Syncell., p. 716, (*Georgius Syncellus et Nicephorus. Ex recensione G. Dindorfii*, Vol. I (=*Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae*, Bonn 1829).

[4] Dexippus, frg., 17 b, (Dexippi fragmenta in *Historici Graeci minores*, ed. L. Dindorfius, Vol. I, Leipzig 1870, pp. 165-200).

[5] Jordanes, *Getica*, 94.

[6] Cf. Vegetius, *Epitoma rei militaris*, IV. 6.

had primitive devices such as ladders which they used in the siege, but which Dexippus does not mention. The Goths probably approached the city in their deep battle-formation because they were afraid of sorties by the defenders, and also because it is a convenient formation for an assault. E.A. Thompson rightly noted that this kind of siege was typical for the Goths during the mid-3rd century A.D.[7]

A little later the Goths besieged cities in quite another way using siege-machines. In 250 they besieged Philippopolis in Thrace[8]. First scouts approached the city, and then the main force advanced against it from all sides. Defended by their shields the Goths tried to find out where the city wall was at its lowest and thinnest. After this reconnaissance, they launched a general assault hurling javelins and shooting arrows. The Goths carried both simple ladders, and folding wheeled ones with them. They moved rectangular, wheeled 'turtles' covered with leather against the gates in order to destroy them. The 'turtles' probably carried iron-tipped battering-rams, mentioned by Dexippus, inside them. The besiegers also moved up wooden towers with footbridges which would allow them to cross over to the top of the city wall. Despite all these preparations the storm was repulsed: the ladders were broken with big stones and logs, the turtles could not resist the impact of huge boulders, and the siege-towers were burnt.

After their initial failure the Goths started to construct a bank so as to enable them to fight at a height equal to the defenders. Its base consisted of vertical logs taken from nearby houses. Earth and wood were placed on top of these logs. The base was located in the moat of the city in order to be close to the city wall, so as to enable them to pass over to it. During the construction of the bank the Goths defended themselves from the missiles of the townsmen with their shields. The latter also prepared to defend themselves, and started to build on top of the city wall. One of the defenders was lowered by a rope at night and set fire to the wooden base of the bank, causing it to collapse. The Goths continued the siege however, filling up the moat with animal and human corpses and heaping wood on top of them. The townspeople succeeded in removing materials from the bank into the city, however, through a postern-gate. Dexippus tells us that the Goths abandoned the siege, but according to Jordanes the city was taken[9].

The siege of Philippopolis therefore presents us with a new stage in the development of Gothic *Poliorcetica*. Whilst not abandoning their former siege methods, the Goths have also started to use simple siege-machines on an extensive scale. These were far from being complicated machines, constructed by the Goths' own carpenters, perhaps borrowing from the skills of some of the Roman captives[10]. The siege was prolonged, and it may be divided into some stages. Firstly there was the general storm using the different engines. Secondly the Goths built the bank to fight against their foes at an equal height. Probably the bank did not encircle the whole wall but only part of it. The besiegers presumably attacked other places in the city walls simultaneously in order to compel the defenders to divide their forces. The bank was the simplest way to surmount the city wall. All this means there had been a significant improvement in siege techniques over time.

In 257 the "Scythians" (a coalition of North Pontic tribes thus named) landed by ship and began to besiege Trapezus, which was defended by a double wall. At night, taking advantage of the fact that the garrison defenders were failing to guard the city properly, the Barbarians leaned prepared timbers against the walls at suitable places, climbed the wall and took the city[11]. Although Zosimus' description of these events is brief, we can surmise the general train of events which led to the capture of the city. At first the Barbarians laid siege to the city, and began to prepare their timbers. At night the city was captured by small groups of the Barbarians using the timbers. The besiegers used trees, not logs or planks, to climb the wall, grabbing hold of the branches. Thus the siege was simple, and made use of the most readily available materials.

[7] E. A. Thompson, *Early Germanic Warfare*, "Past and Present" 14, November 1958, p. 15.

[8] Dexippus, frg. 19.

[9] Jordanes, *Getica*, 103.

[10] Cf. Tacitus, *Historiae* IV 23; E. A. Thompson, loc. cit. p. 13.

[11] Zosimus, I. 33.2-3.

In 269 the "Scythians" besieged Thessalonica, one of the most important cities in Macedonia. They made use of siege-engines, but the historian Eusebius, who described the event, does not tell us what type they were[12]. First the Goths encircled the city and began the siege. Both sides made use of ruses, of which the author mentions fire-arrows. The Goths covered their machines with leather and a fireproof substance. So we can surmise that the Goths were making use of turtles and/or siege towers. We also see the tactic of assaulting the city simultaneously from different directions being employed to take advantage of their superior numbers, denying the defenders the possibility of concentrating their forces in one place so as to repulse the storm.

In the same year the Goths besieged the town of Side in Pamphylia, along the southern shore of Anatolia[13]. For the storm the Goths brought up machines, but the defenders repulsed the assault by throwing down heavy weights upon them. In the second stage of the siege high wooden towers were brought up to the walls. The townspeople erected high structures upon their city walls to enable them to shoot down upon their enemy in the towers. The Goths were repulsed from the city and went away. In the surviving fragment the author draws attention to the siege-machines, but he pays no attention to other events. The siege comprised the same stage as was the case in the assault by the siege engines. Both turtles and battering-rams probably took part in the first storm. Towers took part in the second. It is not clear whether the assault was made along the whole perimeter of the city walls, or was restricted to a single sector of it.

Thus in the third quarter of the 3rd century when the Goths appeared upon the wider historical arena, they had acquired some skill in siege warfare. During the Gothic Wars the main aim of the Barbarians was booty, therefore they preferred to plunder the countryside and the suburbs of the cities. During their invasions the Goths, as an offensive force, tended to attempt to take cities with quick storms. Only simple siege engines were used, the Goths having learned to build them from the Romans[14]. The Barbarians avoided long sieges because there were few provisions available as the countryside had been pillaged, and the local people would have hidden their remaining food and cattle. This meant that Goth foragers would have to wander far away from the main force, thereby endangering the first.

In the last quarter of the 4th century the Goths preferred not to spend their time in capturing cities, they rather plundered the countryside and killed or captured the local population[15]. So their warfare was of a primitive kind: kill all men of fighting age, and take away all the women, children, cattle and booty that they could carry. When the Goths attacked cities, they preferred to storm them with a sudden attack[16], or to storm cities whose fortifications had fallen into disuse[17]. The Visigoths, fighting in the Balkan provinces of the Roman Empire, did not have the skill to besiege cities[18]. During their time spent outside the boundaries of the Empire they lost their knowledge of siege-craft because they did not besiege strongly fortified towns in the Barbaricum. The Goths acquired simple siege-skills in the course of their raids into Roman territory. Thus in 378, after the Roman defeat at Adrianople, the Goths moved on to the city in order to capture it, in the hope of recovering huge booty. They encircled the town, but their first general storm was defeated. As they had no siege machines, they decided to take the city by a stratagem. The besiegers sent some deserters into Adrianople to set fire to a part of the town. When the townsmen were busy extinguishing the flames, the Goths stormed the city. This first attempt was not successful, so the Goths decided to assault at night, which was unusual for them. The Goths rushed forward with ladders

[12] Eusebius, frg. 1, (*Eusebii fragmentum in Historici Graeci minores*, ed. L. Dindorfius, Vol. I, Leipzig 1870, p. 201-4); see also: P. G o e s l l e r, *Zur Belagerungskunst der Germanen*, "Klio" 35, 1942, p. 113.

[13] Dexippus, frg. 21.

[14] V. V. L a v r o v, *Gotskie vojny III v.n.e.: Rimskoe kulturnoe vlijanie na vostochnogermanskie plemena Severnogo Prichernomorja*, [in] *Problemy antichnoj istorii*, Sankt-Peterburg 2003, p. 344-46 (in Russian).

[15] Ammianus Marcellinus XXXI 6.7; Philostorgius, IX 17; Claudius Claudianus V (In Rufinum, II) 55-74, 186-194; XVIII (In Eutropium) 214-220, 576-77; *Rufini Aquileiensis Historiae ecclesiasticae* II 13; Zosimus, V 5.7' 19.6; Isidorus, *Historia Gothorum*, 9.

[16] Zosimus, V 6.4, 7.2; cf. Theodoretius, IV 15.11.

[17] Claudius Claudianus, XVIII (In Eutropium) 274-8.

[18] Ammianus Marcellinus, XXXI 6.4. 16.3, 7.

but without a real plan, and the assault was called off[19]. The siege of Thessalonica, involving a number of storms, was also unsuccessful[20]. In 395-6 Alaric's troops plundered Boeotia, and only the townspeople of a few cities, like Tegea and Thebes, beat off the enemy[21].

In general, in the last quarter of the 4th century, a period which is better known to us, the Visigoths had developed only primitive skills in siege-craft. They tended to take only the richer towns by storm, in line with their heroic ethos, because they had no skills in constructing siege-engines, or no time for it. During sieges their *Wagenburg* served as a camp and as a base for their military operations[22]. During the assault they shot at the defenders in order to force them away from the top of the walls. The besiegers re-used the defenders' missiles. The Goths stormed cities relying on their numerical superiority to exhaust the townspeople's energy during a prolonged assault. They could be stopped by bad weather or by night. As the Goths usually had no siege-machines, they preferred to attempt to take cities by storm, or by simple stratagems. Before Constantinople, however, they did try to build some siege-machines to be used in the assault, though in the event they did not use them[23]. So we can detect little progress in their siege-craft.

The 5th century did not witness a significant evolution in Gothic siege-craft. The Goths still preferred not to besiege cities. They would burn suburbs but leave cities prepared for defence alone (e.g. at Philippi in 473), or would blockade cities in order to starve them into surrender (e.g. Bazas in 414, Narbo in 436-7, Arcadiopolis in 473)[24]. The countryside through which Gothic troops marched was plundered. Houses were burnt and the local population was killed[25]. In his *Chronicle* Bishop Hidatius describes the destruction of Asturia in Northern Spain by the Visigoths in A.D. 457/8 in the following terms:

"nec mora promiscui generis reperta illic caeditur multitudo, sanctae effringitur ecclesiae, altaribus direptis et demolitis sacer omnis ornatus, et usus aufertur. duo illic episcopi inventi cum omni clero abducuntur in captivitatem: invalidor promiscui sexus agitur miseranda captivitas; residuis et vacuis civitatis domibus datis incendio camporum loca vastantur"[26].

The invaders might kill all the people they found, as Alaric did during his expedition to Italy[27]. Long sieges were rare. The Goths might blockade cities, as political centres, in order to fulfil their strategic plans. So in 408 the Visigothic leader Alaric blockaded Rome, occupied the port, cutting the city of from provisions, which caused a famine in the city[28]. The Gothic king Theodoric besieged Odovacer in Ravenna for two and a half years, from the end of 490 to February/March 493, stationing his forces in a fortified camp near the city[29]. The Goths could not maintain a siege throughout the winter[30]. In the course of a siege the Goths would erect an embankment around the city, for example during the siege of Thessalonica in 474[31]. The besiegers could use siege-machines, especially battering-rams, during the assault[32]. The Goths could take cities by sudden assaults[33] or by stratagems. Thus in 410 Alaric sent 300 young noble Goths disguised as slaves to the Roman senators, who, on an appointed day (24 August) killed the guards on the gates and

[19] Ammianus Marcellinus, XXXI 15.2-15.

[20] Ambrosius, *Epistulae*, 15.5. Cf. V. T. S i r o t e n k o, *Istorija mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenij v Evrope vo vtoroj polovinje IV – nachalje VI v.*, Perm 1975, p. 31 (in Russian).

[21] Zosimus, V 5.7; O. F i e b i g e r, *Inschriftensamlung zur Geschichte der Ostgermanen*, NF, [in:] *Akademie der Wissenschaft in Wien. Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Denkschriften*, Bd. 70, Abhandlung 3, Wien-Leipzig 1939, p. 34, No. 53.

[22] Ammianus Marcellinus, XXXI 15.5.

[23] Ammianus Marcellinus, XXXI 15.5.

[24] Paulinus, *Eucharistion*, 343-99; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, VII 475-80; Malchus, frg. 2, 18 (*Malchi fragmenta* [in;] *Historici Graeci Minores*, ed. L. Dindorfius Vol. I, Leipzig 1870, p. 383-424); Isidorus, *Historia Gothorum*, 24; cf. Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae*, III 3.3, VII 7.2; Isidorus, *Historia Gothorum*, 14, 33.

[25] Malchus, frg. 17, 18; cf. Socrates Scholasticus, VII 10; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, VII 361-8; Chron. Gall. A. 452, 52; Zosimus V 13.3, 14.5, 17.2, 18.6, 21.6; Marcelinus, Com. A. 482.2, 487; Euagrius, *Hist. Eccl.*, III 25; Isidorus, *Historia Gothorum*, 14, 33.

[26] Hydatius, *Chron.*, 186.

[27] Procopius, *Bel. Vand.*, I 2, 12.

[28] Zosimus, V 39. 1-3; Sozomen, IX 6.2; Philostorgius, XII. 3; cf. Claudius Claudianus, XXVIII (*De VI cons. Honor.*) 443-7.

[29] Anon. Vales., 11, 53; Jordanes, *Getica*, 293-4.

[30] Claudius Claudianus, XXVIII (*De VI cons. Honor.*) 444-5.

[31] Jordanes, *Getica*, 287.

[32] Philostorgius, XII 3; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, XI 59-75; cf. Prosper Tiro, *Chron.*, 1324.

[33] Malchus, frg., 18.

opened them to the Goths. The Visigothic troops entered the city and sacked it[34].

The Goths used both natural and artificial fortifications in defence. When attacked by the Roman general Stilicho Alaric occupied the impassable bank of the River Adda, a left-hand tributary of the Po[35]. Sometimes the ancient Germans fortified vulnerable points in their borders or lines of defence with earth banks. In the early 1st century A.D. the Agrivarii defended the accessible passes leading to their territory from the raids of the Cherusci with a wide earthen bank[36]. The Goths also made use of this kind of fortification. The Tetraxites, closing their shields, fought against the Huns on earth fortifications like those by which the Cherusci defended themselves against the Romans in A.D. 16[37]. In 375 the Visigothic ruler Atanaric, threatened by a Hunnic invasion, began to erect high banks between two rivers[38]. This fortification did not save the Goths and they were forced to retreat into the Balkan provinces of the Roman Empire. Later, in 551-2, the Ostrogothic king Teja erected a fortified line in the region of Verona to prevent the Byzantine army from advancing into Italy.[39] Open places were defended by ditches, pits and moats[40]. The line comprised different types of fortifications from simple banks to forts manned by garrisons. Perhaps the concept of defending a line was borrowed from the Romans by the Goths. In order to prevent the enemy crossing rivers, the Goths destroyed the bridges. The bridge would be dismantled at both ends, leaving the central section intact[41].

Little information is preserved concerning the methods of defence used by the Goths under siege in the 3rd-5th centuries because the Goths were usually the attackers. They used simple methods of defence: shooting arrows, and throwing stones and logs[42]. They shot aimed arrows, not a barrage of un-aimed shots[43]. The Goths could be badly fed under siege, which was contrary to their normal practice[44]. Dying by starvation rather than by the weapons of their enemy was contrary to their ethos. Consequently they would make desperate sorties to force the enemy to abandon the siege due to their losses, or to break through their lines[45].

Consequently it seems to be the case that there were no significant changes in the siege-craft of the Goths for three centuries. We know that the Goths besieged cities because they were an attacking people. They still preserved their 'heroic ethos' which required an open fight. Therefore the Goths did not prefer to engage in the siege or defence of cities. They preferred to plunder the countryside and avoided fortified towns. This was dictated by the rural village life of the Goths, to which the Graeco-Roman *Poliorcetica* was unknown. They took cities in two ways, by blockade and by storm, only in rare cases combined. They usually tried to seize a city by storm at the outset, but if this failed they blockaded the city to try and force the garrison into surrender. Sometimes the city could be encircled by a bank, but more frequently the surrounding territory was controlled by camps pitched in strategic places. The Goths used ladders and wheeled towers in the assault, and battering-rams to break down the walls. Both shields and tortoises were used for protection. Perhaps the siege-machines which are sometimes mentioned were built on the advice of Roman specialists, either deserters or captives. The Goths did not have a siege-train, and siege-engines were built on the spot. The ancient sources for the 3rd to the mid 5th centuries only mention the Goths using missile-throwing machines once, in Italy in 552[46].

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[34] Procopius, *Bell. Vand.*, I 2.14-26; Isidorus, *Historia Gothorum*, 18.

[35] Claudius Claudianus, XXVIII (*De VI cons. Honor.*) 481-2.

[36] Tacitus, *Ann.* II 19.

[37] Tacitus, *Ann.* II 19-21; Procopius, *Bel. Goth.*, IV 5.19.

[38] Ammianus Marcellinus, XXXI 3.7.

[39] Procopius, *Bel. Goth.*, IV 26.22.

[40] Procopius, *Bel. Goth.*, III 24, 31-2.

[41] Procopius, *Bel. Goth.*, IV 28.5.

[42] Merobaud., *Paneg.* II 158-61 (F. M. C l o v e r, *Flavius Merobaudes: A Translation and Historical Commentary. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s. Vol. 61, pt. 1, Philadelphia 1971); Procopius, *Bel. Goth.*, II 27.9; Agathias, I 9; Greg. Turon., *Hist. Franc.*, VI 43.

[43] Agathias, I 9; cf. Merobaud., *Paneg.*, II 159-61.

[44] Claudius Claudianus, XXVIII (*De VI cons. Honor.*) 238-49; Procopius, *Bel. Goth.*, II 20.13; cf. Mauric., *Strat.*, XI 3.10; G. D a g r o n, *"Ceux d'en face". Les peuples étrangers dans les traités militaires byzantins* [in] "Travaux et Mémoires" 10, 1987, p. 214.

[45] Procopius, *Bel. Goth.*, II 24.18; IV 35.16-7; cf. II 28.28-9.

[46] H. W o l f r a m, *Goty*, (Russian ed. Sankt-Peterburg 2003), p. 439.