The Emperor Michael III and the Battle of Bishop's Meadow (A.D. 863)

George Huxley

The four books of Genesios deal with Byzantine history from the accession of Leo the Armenian to the death of Basil I. In the fourth book Genesios includes an account of the defeat by Petronas, uncle of the emperor Michael III, of the redoubtable ‘Omar ‘Ubaid Allah al Aqta of Melitene.¹ According to the historian, ‘Omar ("Aμερ, ‘Amr) invaded the Armeniak theme and advanced as far as the coast at Amisos where, because he could progress no further, he ordered the sea to be beaten with rods (Genesios here compares the behaviour of Xerxes at the Hellespont).

The emperor, being dismayed at the number of prisoners taken by ‘Omar, appointed Petronas to command the tagma of the Schools with orders to attack the enemy. When news of the coming attack reached ‘Omar, his subordinates urged him to retreat to his own territory and to fight only if the Byzantine forces overtook them; but the emir, declaring that he was no coward, decided to advance towards Petronas and his army. The opposed forces drew close together in the Abisian district on the borders of the Paphlagonian and Armeniak themes, with a mountain between them, at a place called Porson (Πόρσιον). Both sides tried to occupy the mountain, and in the ensuing battle ‘Omar was killed. His troops were put to flight, and his son with one hundred men retreated across the Halys river, but Machairas the merarch (hypostrategos) in Charsianon intercepted them, so that there was no survivor to bring news of the defeat to the Saracens of Melitene.

Except for one detail the narrative of Genesios is internally consistent (it may well come from a lost Vita of Petronas²). ‘Omar advances westwards from Amisos and engages Petronas on the borders of Paphlagonia and Armeniak—at a place, therefore, somewhere to the west of the lower course of the Halys river. The place was called Porson. After the defeat at Porson ‘Omar’s son retreats eastwards or

¹ Genesius, ed. C. Lachmann (Bonn 1834) 94,1–97,8.
southeastwards across the Halys into Charsianon. The one inconsistent detail is the statement that the two armies met in the Abisian territory 500 miles from Amisos (ἐπὶ Ἀμίσου ὡςεὶ μίλια ψ’); no point on the boundary between Paphlagonia and Armeniak is so much as 500 miles by road from Amisos, and it is clear that the numeral is corrupt —so ρ’ (100) is an attractive emendation.  

Like Genesios, the author of Theophanes Continuatus Books 1 to 4 dedicated his work to the emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus. The Continuator uses a different source and combines it with a hagiographic legend. The legend related that before the battle Petronas, when he was at Ephesos as general of the Thrakesian theme, was assured of victory by John, a monk from Mount Latros (Latmos); not long after the defeat of ‘Omar, the legend added, Petronas promptly followed his spiritual adviser into the next world. The hagiographical accretion need not detain us here. The significant point is that al-

8 ἐν τῷ Ἄβισσιανῷ. According to Grégoire this is the correct text (Byzantion 5 [1929/30] 346), but Lachmann (p.96,6) prints ἐν τῷ Ἄβισσιανῷ. A connexion with Ἔβεσσα is not certain.

4 H. Grégoire, Byzantion 8 (1933) 536.
5 Theophanes Continuatus 4.23 (180,13–181,4 and 183,13–184,10) ed. I. Bekker (Bonn 1838).
6 In Theophanes Continuatus the hermit John of Latros meets Petronas for the first time at Ephesos shortly before the battle with ‘Omar and advises the general to secure divine assistance by having the image of the apostle John painted on his soldiers’ shields (pp.180, 14–181,2 ed. Bekker). According to the Vita of St Antony the Younger, however, St Antony, whose earlier name had been John, had already been for some time the spiritual father of Petronas, when the latter was put in command of the expedition against the Arabs.
though the Continuator follows a different source, his account of the battle is topographically consistent with the narrative of Genesios. Petronas found ‘Omar to be encamped in a naturally defensible place called Poson (Πόσων). Here a river called Lalakaon flowed from north to south, and there was a meadow called in rustic dialect Gyris or Gyrin (Γύριν). The East Roman commander determined to surround the enemy, and accordingly the generals of Armeniak, Boukellarioi, Koloneia and Paphlagonia were stationed to the north; those of Anatolikoi, Opsikion and Kappadokia were drawn up on the south, together with the commanders of the kleisourai Seleukeia and Charisianon, while Petronas himself with the four imperial tagmata and the generals of Thrake and Makedonia took up positions to the west. The men of the Thrakesian theme were with their general Petronas.

When ‘Omar saw that he was surrounded, he asked a prisoner the names of the locality, the meadow and the river. The prisoner answered Πτώσων, Λαλακάων and Γύριν. ‘Omar, whom the inventor of the conversation supposed to be fluent in Greek, immediately interpreted the names to be ill-omened—they signified ‘downfall’ (πτώσεις), ‘ruin of his army’ (λαοί κάκωσεις) and ‘encirclement’ (γυρισθόταν). Of these names Porson or Poson is common to Genesios and the Continuator, and Lalakaon as the place of the battle is found in the Logothete, but neither Lalakaon nor Poson can be certainly identified.

Petronas, who was commander of the Thrakesian theme, was ordered by the emperor to fight a defensive campaign only, not to confront the enemy in a pitched battle. St Antony came to Petronas at Ephesos and assured him that ‘Omar (Ἄμβρως) would not see Syria again if Petronas marched against him in the name of the Lord and sang the fourth canon of St Nicolas (Vita 14–15, ed. F. Halkin, AnalBoll 42 [1944] 187–225, at 218–20). In another hagiographical version St George of Mytilene foretells to Petronas the victory to be won by him twenty years later—over the Assyrian Ammor (‘Omar, ‘Amr): AnalBoll 18 (1899) 252. As for St Antony, he had formerly been governor ἐκ προσώπου of the theme Kibyrrhaiotai; it is possible therefore that the advice given by him to Petronas at Ephesos, if he ever gave it, was military as well as spiritual; for St Antony’s governorship see F. Halkin, art. cit. 188. In Skylitzes Petronas visits John at Latros (ed. J. Thurn [Berlin/New York 1973] p.100,2). As in Theophanes Continuatus, Petronas in the Vita of St Antony dies close in time to his spiritual father Antony (17–18, pp.220–21 ed. Halkin). The detailed order-of-battle may well have been supplied to the Continuator from the imperial archives by the Porphyrogenitus.

---

7 Georgius Monachus (Cont.) 825,3 (with Theoph. Cont., op.cit. [supra n.5]).
8 Grégoire draws attention to a southward-flowing river Halmys; this ran east of Gangra and so close to the border between Armeniak and Paphlagonia. It is mentioned in the Vita of St Hypatios of Gangra (Byzantium 8 [1933] 538–39); but Grégoire’s proposal to link Ἀλμύρα with Λαλακάων through ἄλωκάς is not helpful. Oddly, Skylitzes exchanges the names of the river and meadow (p.100 ed. Thurn).
`Omar fought desperately within the trap set by Petronas, but he was killed, and his son, who escaped, was caught by the *kleisourarches* of Charsianon.

Thus the topography of the battle in *Theophanes Continuatus* is more detailed than in Genesios, but it does not contradict Genesios' narrative. The fact of troops from Charsianon having been stationed on the south is consistent with the battle having taken place northwards of Charsianon, as in Genesios. The Continuator does not state, as Genesios does, that `Omar advanced from Amisos to meet Petronas, and according to the Logothete, Petronas the commander-in-chief (together with Nasar of the Boukellarians) trapped `Omar at Lalakaon on his retreat—*λοχίζαντες τὴν τῆς ὑποστροφῆς αὐτοῦ συναντών αὐτῷ εἰς τὸν Λαλακάωνα*;\(^9\) but there is nothing in the Logothete to suggest that the battle of Lalakaon took place far away from Amisos: Amisos is not mentioned by him here. (The immediately preceding mention of `Omar at Sinope refers to an earlier campaign). A notable variant in the Logothete is that a κόμης overtakes the fleeing emir.\(^{10}\) In Genesios and *Theophanes Continuatus* it is `Omar's son who escapes from the trap and is caught later.

So far, we are entitled to infer that Porphyrogenitan historiography, in spite of variations of detail and emphasis, was unanimous in placing the battle between Petronas and `Omar west of the Halys, close to the boundary between the Paphlagonian and Armeniak themes. The inference was, however, rejected by J. B. Bury, who in a discussion of the Arabo-Byzantine campaigns of A.D. 838, argued that the battle of 863 was fought at a place known to Arab writers as Mardj-al-Uskuf (`Bishop's Meadow').\(^{11}\) This he proposed to identify with a place (Nazianzos) or a district (extending from Nazianzos to the Halys, perhaps as far as Nyssa) in Cappadocia. We can agree with Bury that Mardj-al-Uskuf lay somewhere in Cappadocia, south of the Halys, since the narrative of the campaign of 838 given by Ṭabarī shows that to have been so. According to Ṭabarī, Al Muṭṭaṣim commanded Aśīnās to enter Byzantine territory by way of the Cilician

---

\(^{9}\) 825,1–4 Bonn. Nasar is also mentioned with Petronas at the battle of Lalakaon by Leo Grammaticus p.238,21 (Bonn 1842).

\(^{10}\) Georgius Monachus (Cont.) 824,12 Bonn. For the tendency of Arab expeditions into Anatolia to make for the coast, see H. Ahrweiler, "L'Asie Mineure et les invasions arabes," *RHist* 227 (1962) 8–10 (repr. in *Etudes sur les structures administratives et sociales de Byzance* [Variorum, London, 1971] IX).

Gates; Ašinās set out on 19 June; the Calif’s own advance guard followed, and Muʿtaṣim himself set out on 21 June. When Ašinās had reached Bishop’s Meadow, a letter came to him from Muʿtaṣim, who was then at al Maṭāmir, warning him that the emperor (Theophilos) lay in wait ahead of him and was intending to surprise his force at the crossing of the ‘Lāmis’. Ašinās was therefore ordered to wait at Bishop’s Meadow.\(^\text{12}\) Since the invaders had been advancing northwards through Cappadocia, the name of a river ‘Lāmis’ (Lamos), far away on the Arabo-Byzantine frontier in western Cilicia, cannot be correct here; ‘Lāmis’ is a mistake for ‘Halys’,\(^\text{13}\) and it is clear that Ašinās was at most two days’ march ahead of Muʿtaṣim, within easy reach of a messenger from al Maṭāmir. Al Maṭāmir was a district where there were subterranean strongholds, to the north of Tyana in southern Cappadocia. The narrative in Ṭabarī shows that Bishop’s Meadow cannot be far from al Maṭāmir, and it is impossible that Ṭabarī thought of Mardj-al-Uskuf as lying far away from Cappadocia, on the borders of the Paphlagonian and Armeniak themes. Bury therefore accepted the distance 500 miles in Genesios, rejected his reference to the border between the Paphlagonian and Armeniak themes, and maintained that Petronas fought ʿOmar of Melitene in Cappadocia, somewhere to the south of Nyssa. To account for the large number of miles from Amisos, 500 according to the unamended text of Genesios, Bury supposed ʿOmar to have followed a devious route southwards from the Black Sea coast.\(^\text{14}\)

H. Grégoire, while agreeing with Bury that Bishop’s Meadow was shown by Ṭabarī and also by the geographer Ibn Khurdādbih to lie in Cappadocia, nevertheless insisted that Genesios was correct—the battle between Petronas and ʿOmar was fought on the frontier of the Armeniak and Paphlagonian themes. Grégoire also believed that there was a memory of the battle in the story of an encirclement of Arabs by Byzantines in Digenes Akrites;\(^\text{15}\) this fight was said in the

\(^{12}\) Tabari (French transl. pp.295–96) in Vasiliev, op.cit. (infra n.13).

\(^{13}\) Bury, art.cit. (supra n.11) 122–23. M. Canard, in A. A. Vasiliev, Byzance et les Arabes I, edd. H. Grégoire and M. Canard (Brussels 1935, repr. 1959) 412, thinks that ‘Lāmis’ conceals the name of the river Halys, since Muʿtaṣim would not have needed to cross the Halys on the way from al Maṭāmir to his objective Ankyra; but the original orders given to Ašinās and later countermanded by the letter sent from Muʿtaṣim at al Maṭāmir to him at Bishop’s Meadow may well have required him to cross the Halys, not to advance directly to Ankyra.

\(^{14}\) art.cit. (supra n.11) 128.

\(^{15}\) E. Trapp, Digenes Akrites (Wien 1971) G675, E495, Z920.
epic to have taken place at Malakopia-Melegob (near Nazianzos in Cappadocia), and Grégoire argued, most implausibly, that the story had been transferred from the borders of Paphlagonia to Cappadocia owing to a confusion of a mountain called Mala near Gangra with Malakopia in Cappadocia. It is time to leave these frail hypotheses and to look again at the sources.

Yaqūbi, who died at the end of the ninth century and so was contemporary with the campaigns of 863, describes them briefly. He states that Mustaʿin sent Gaʿfar al Khayyāt in the year A.H. 249 (863/4) to make the summer expedition. With Gaʿfar was ‘Omar, governor of Melitene. When they entered Greek territory, ‘Omar asked Gaʿfar’s permission to advance further. ‘Omar was at the head of eight thousand men. The enemy surrounded him, and he and his force were defeated.

Next comes Ṭabarī, who died in 923. Concerning A.H. 249 he writes that the events of the year included the summer expedition of Gaʿfar ibn Dinār. He occupied a strong point and also al Maṭāmīr. ‘Omar asked his permission to march against a certain country of the Greeks. Permission was granted, and ‘Omar departed, taking with him many men of Melitene. The reference to al Maṭāmīr, and Yaqūbi’s statement that Gaʿfar had ‘Omar with him, together show that the two armies had advanced through the Cilician Gates before ‘Omar had marched with his own force further north from the neighbourhood at Maṭāmīr, north of Tyana. Bury reasonably suggested that Gaʿfar may have been Governor of Tarsos.

Ṭabarī continues: “He [‘Omar] met the emperor, who was accompanied by a large number of Byzantines, at a place called al Arz [or ‘-rz] in Mardj-al-Usquf. He engaged him with his troops in a fierce
battle, and many died on both sides.” Thus ʿOmar fought the emperor Michael III at Bishop’s Meadow in Cappadocia after the emir had parted from Gaʾfar and advanced northwards from al Maṭāmīr. The battle was a hard one, but there is no sign that ʿOmar was killed at this stage in the campaign. On the contrary, the emperor was not able to check his advance.

It is habitual in Arab chroniclers to leap abruptly from one stage in the sequence of events to the next, as Bury himself recognized in discussing the invasion of 838. Having mentioned the heavy losses of Michael III and ʿOmar in the battle of Bishop’s Meadow, Ṭabarī jumps to the next engagement: “Then the Byzantines to the number of 50,000 encircled him and killed ʿOmar and one thousand amongst the Mohammedans.” The thousand were survivors of the eight thousand who had been under his command, according to Yaʿqūbī, when the emir parted from Gaʾfar. Thus Ṭabarī describes two battles, not one as Bury and Grégoire supposed. The first was between ʿOmar and Michael III in Cappadocia; in the second, ʿOmar was surrounded with the remnant of his force. From the Greek sources we learn only about the second.

We can now reconstruct the order of events in 863 in Asia Minor. Gaʾfar and ʿOmar, having joined forces at Tarsos, advanced through the Cilician Gates. They campaigned together in al Maṭāmīr and then parted company. ʿOmar advanced to Mardj-al-Uskuf, where he was intercepted by the emperor. Michael III, in a delaying action, destroyed much of ʿOmar’s force but suffered heavy losses and was not able to stop his progress. ʿOmar reached the coast at Amisos and then turned westwards, against the advice of his officers, to engage Petronas on the borders of Armeniak and Paphlagonia. The emir was surrounded by the imperial forces and killed. His son fled homewards across the Halys but was overtaken and killed. Thus there is no disagreement about the topography of ʿOmar’s campaign between the Greek and Arabic sources. There was a battle in Bishop’s Meadow in Cappadocia, and there was another battle, at Lalakaon, on the

21 Ṭabarī, loc.cit. (supra n.18).

22 Skylitzes (p.100,55 ed. J. Thurn) says that he was making for Melitene—a reasonable inference.

23 *An officer having the family name Lalakon was εὐρατηγός of Armeniak in the time of the emperor Leo VI (Const.Porph. De Admin.Imp. 45, p.206, 47 M.-J.); the name may have a local connexion, as Bury suggests, art.cit. (supra n.11) 125 n.20. W. M. Ramsay, *The Historical
border of Armeniak and Paphlagonia. Since such a large part of the combined thematic and tagmatic armies had been placed under the command of Petronas, it is not surprising that the emperor had a hard fight in the first of the battles.

The *damnatio memoriae* of the emperor Michael III perpetuated by Genesios and the Continuator on behalf of Constantine Porphyrogenitus required that the credit for the success of 863 be given to Petronas alone, or to Petronas and John of Latros. But the emperor Michael’s share of glory was not entirely forgotten in Byzantium: in a work of the Porphyrogenitus himself, *De Ceremoniis*, there are preserved *Akta* in honour of the victory over the emir, and in the hymn the triumphant emperor is given his due guerdon of praise, together with the two Augustae (his mother Theodora and his wife Eudokia):25

\[\ldots\, \chi\acute{a}\rho\omicron\upsilon\upsilon\zeta, \tau\omicron\upsilon\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\alpha\theta, \upsilon\sigma\nu\iota, \varphi\upsilon\lambda\alpha\zeta, \varepsilon\upsilon, \pi\omicron\rho\omicron\phi\omicron\upsilon\alpha\zeta, \varepsilon\upsilon, \tau\omicron\nu\iota\omicron\omicron\upsilon\lambda\iota\nu\upsilon, \eta\, \alpha\nu\delta\omicron\alpha\iota\alpha.\]

\[\chi\acute{a}\rho\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\upsilon\zeta, \delta\iota\omicron\upsilon\iota\sigma\nu\iota, \upsilon\sigma\nu, \iota\sigma\nu\omicron\nu\iota\upsilon\iota, \chi\acute{a}\rho\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\upsilon\zeta, \upsilon, \delta\iota\omicron\upsilon\iota\sigma\nu.\]

\[\delta\iota\omicron\Theta\epsilon\omicron\omicron\sigma\varsigma\varepsilon\varepsilon, \varphi\upsilon\lambda\alpha\zeta, \varepsilon\upsilon, \tau\omicron\nu\iota\omicron\omicron\upsilon\lambda\iota\nu\upsilon, \pi\omicron\rho\omicron\phi\omicron\upsilon, \varepsilon\upsilon, \tau\omicron\nu, \iota\sigma\nu\epsilon, \kappa\alpha\omicron\omicron\omicron, \tau\omicron\nu\iota, \upsilon\sigma\nu, \varepsilon\upsilon, \pi\omicron\rho\omicron\phi\omicron\upsilon, \varepsilon\upsilon, \tau\omicron\nu, \iota\sigma\nu\epsilon, \kappa\alpha\omicron\omicron, \tau\omicron\nu,\]

\[\varepsilon\iota\varsigma\kappa\alpha\omicron\upsilon\omicron\varsigma, \delta\iota, \Theta\epsilon\omicron\omicron\sigma\varsigma, \tau\omicron\nu\iota\omicron, \omicron, \lambda\nu\omicron, \upsilon, \upsilon.\]

**Geography of Asia Minor** (London 1890) 77 and map opposite p.196, proposed to identify the river Lalakaon with a southward-flowing tributary of the Halys between Gangra and Andrapa. This would suit quite well the distance ρ miles from Amisos in the emended text of Genesios (p.96.6 Lachmann).

25 *De Cer. 1*, pp. 332–33 (Bonn 1829). See also Bury, *op.cit. (supra n.19)* 284, and *eundem, EHR* 22 (1907) 434, on the "*Ακτα επί μεγαστάνω άμερη εν πολέμω ήτπηθέντι και αναφεθέντι.\" Notably absent from Greek and Arab accounts of the fighting in 863 is the ally of ʿOmar, the Paulician leader Karbeas of Tephrike, but he may already have been on his deathbed at the time: *cf.* P. Lemerle, *Travaux et Mémoires* 5 (1973) 95–96. Neither Genesios nor *Theophanes Continuatus* mentions that the victory of Petronas in 863 was followed by a campaign to the frontiers of Mesopotamia; this was opposed by the governor of Armenia and Azerbaijan, ʿAli-ibn-Yahyā, who fell in battle against the imperial forces in the month of ramadān of the same year (18 October–16 November)—see Vasiliev, *op.cit. (supra n.13)* 256—as we learn from ʿTabari (Vasiliev, *op.cit. 325).