

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

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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.<sup>1</sup> According to the historian, 'Omar (Ἄμερ, '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 (Πόρσων). 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.

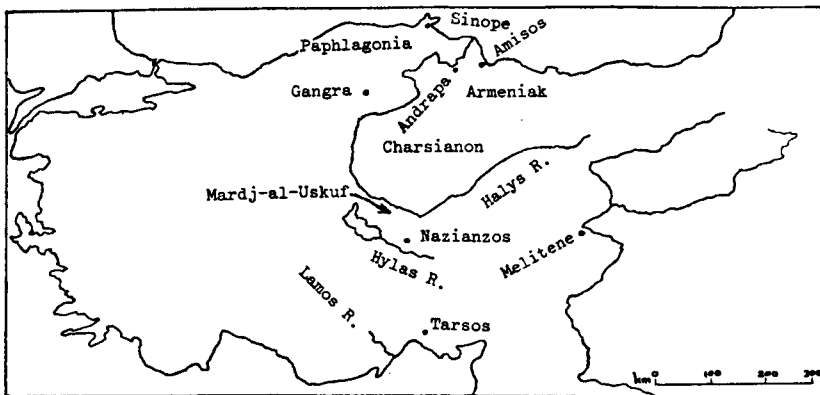
Except for one detail the narrative of *Genesios* is internally consistent (it may well come from a lost *Vita* of Petronas<sup>2</sup>). 'Omar advances westwards from Amisos and engages Petronas on the borders of Paphlagonia and Armeniak—at a place, therefore, somewhere to the west of the lower course of the Halys river. The place was called Porson. After the defeat at Porson 'Omar's son retreats eastwards or

<sup>1</sup> *Genesius*, ed. C. Lachmann (Bonn 1834) 94,1-97,8.

<sup>2</sup> P. Karlin-Hayter, *Byzantion* 41 (1971) 494.

southeastwards across the Halys into Charsianon. The one inconsistent detail is the statement that the two armies met in the Abisian<sup>3</sup> territory 500 miles from Amisos (ἀπὸ Ἀμισσοῦ ὡσεὶ μίλια φ'); 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.<sup>4</sup>

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



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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.<sup>5</sup> The hagiographical accretion need not detain us here.<sup>6</sup> The significant point is that al-

<sup>3</sup> ἐν τῷ Ἀβισιανῷ. According to Grégoire this is the correct text (*Byzantion* 5 [1929/30] 346), but Lachmann (p.96,6) prints ἐν τῷ Ἀβυσιανῷ. A connexion with Ἐβίκα is not certain.

<sup>4</sup> H. Grégoire, *Byzantion* 8 (1933) 536.

<sup>5</sup> *Theophanes Continuatus* 4.25 (180,13–181,4 and 183,13–184,10) ed. I. Bekker (Bonn 1838).

<sup>6</sup> 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 Gyrim (*Γῦριν*). The East Roman commander determined to surround the enemy, and accordingly the generals of Armeniak, Boukellarion, 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 *Γῦριν*. 'Omar, whom the inventor of the conversation supposed to be fluent in Greek, immediately interpreted the names to be ill-omened—they signified 'downfall' (*πτῶσις*), 'ruin of his army' (*λαοῦ κάκωσις*) and 'encirclement' (*γυρισθῆναι*). 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,<sup>7</sup> but neither Lalakaon nor Poson can be certainly identified.<sup>8</sup>

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 (*Ἀμβρος*) 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 προεώπου* 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.

<sup>7</sup> Georgius Monachus (Cont.) 825,3 (with *Theoph.Cont.*, *op.cit.* [supra n.5]).

<sup>8</sup> Grégoire draws attention to a southward-flowing river Halmyros; 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 (*Byzantion* 8 [1933] 538–39); but Grégoire's proposal to link Ἀλμυρός with Λαλακάων through ἀλυκός 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 Genesisios, but it does not contradict Genesisios' 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 Genesisios. The Continuator does not state, as Genesisios 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—*λοχίχαντες τὴν τῆς ὑποτροφῆς αὐτοῦ συναντῶσιν αὐτῷ εἰς τὸν Λαλακάωνα*;<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> In Genesisios 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').<sup>11</sup> 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 Muṭaṣim commanded Ašinās to enter Byzantine territory by way of the Cilician

<sup>9</sup> 825,1-4 Bonn. Nasar is also mentioned with Petronas at the battle of Lalakaon by Leo Grammaticus p.238,21 (Bonn 1842).

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> "Mutassim's March through Cappadocia in A.D. 838," *JHS* 29 (1909) 120-29.

Gates; Ašinās set out on 19 June; the Calif's own advance guard followed, and Mu'tašim himself set out on 21 June. When Ašinās had reached Bishop's Meadow, a letter came to him from Mu'tašim, who was then at al Maṭāmīr, 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.<sup>12</sup> 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',<sup>13</sup> and it is clear that Ašinās was at most two days' march ahead of Mu'tašim, within easy reach of a messenger from al Maṭāmīr. Al Maṭāmīr 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 Maṭāmīr, 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 'Omar 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 'Omar to have followed a devious route southwards from the Black Sea coast.<sup>14</sup>

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 'Omar 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;<sup>15</sup> this fight was said in the

<sup>12</sup> Ṭabarī (French transl. pp.295–96) in Vasiliev, *op.cit.* (*infra* n.13).

<sup>13</sup> 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 Mu'tašim would not have needed to cross the Halys on the way from al Maṭāmīr to his objective Ankyra; but the original orders given to Ašinās and later countermanded by the letter sent from Mu'tašim at al Maṭāmīr to him at Bishop's Meadow may well have required him to cross the Halys, not to advance directly to Ankyra.

<sup>14</sup> *art.cit.* (*supra* n.11) 128.

<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> It is time to leave these frail hypotheses and to look again at the sources.

Ya'qūbī, who died at the end of the ninth century and so was contemporary with the campaigns of 863, describes them briefly. He states that Mustafīn sent Ġa'far al Khayyāṭ in the year A.H. 249 (863/4) to make the summer expedition. With Ġa'far was 'Omar, governor of Melitene. When they entered Greek territory, 'Omar asked Ġa'far'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.<sup>17</sup>

Next comes Ṭabarī, who died in 923. Concerning A.H. 249 he writes that the events of the year included the summer expedition of Ġa'far ibn Dīnār. 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.<sup>18</sup> The reference to al Maṭāmīr, and Ya'qūbī's statement that Ġa'far 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 Ġa'far may have been Governor of Tarsos.<sup>19</sup>

Ṭabarī continues: "He [‘Omar] met the emperor, who was accompanied by a large number of Byzantines, at a place called al Arz [or ‘-rz’<sup>20</sup>] in Mardj-al-Usqf. He engaged him with his troops in a fierce

<sup>16</sup> Grégoire, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 534–39; *idem*, in Vasiliev, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.13) 252. See also Grégoire, *Byzantion* 5 (1929/30) 339. It is most unlikely that the mention of an encirclement at Melegob in *Digenes Akrites* recalls the encirclement of 'Omar. In the epic it is Digenes' father Mousour-Ioannes who escapes from encirclement at Malakopia-Melegob, but 'Omar was trapped, and the epic recalls him in Ambron, the maternal grandfather of Mousour-Ioannes: see GRBS 15 (1974) 319 and 322–23.

<sup>17</sup> Ya'qūbī (French transl.) in Vasiliev, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.13) 277.

<sup>18</sup> Ṭabarī in Vasiliev, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.13) 325. In view of the division of forces it is noteworthy that the *Vita* of St Antony the Younger (para. 14, ed. Halkin [*supra* n.6]) refers to two expeditionary forces of the godless Ishmaelites (δύο φορσάτα τῶν ἀθέων Ἰσμαηλιτῶν) in connexion with the story of Petronas and the saint.

<sup>19</sup> *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire* (London 1912) 283 n.1.

<sup>20</sup> For the text see Bury, *art.cit.* (*supra* n.11) 128.

battle, and many died on both sides." Thus 'Omar fought the emperor Michael III at Bishop's Meadow in Cappadocia after the emir had parted from Ga'far and advanced northwards from al Maṭāmīr. The battle was a hard one, but there is no sign that 'Omar 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.<sup>21</sup> Having mentioned the heavy losses of Michael III and 'Omar 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 'Omar and one thousand amongst the Mohammedans."<sup>22</sup> The thousand were survivors of the eight thousand who had been under his command, according to Ya'qūbī, when the emir parted from Ga'far. Thus Ṭabarī describes two battles, not one as Bury and Grégoire supposed. The first was between 'Omar and Michael III in Cappadocia; in the second, 'Omar 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. Ga'far and 'Omar, having joined forces at Tarsos, advanced through the Cilician Gates. They campaigned together in al Maṭāmīr and then parted company. 'Omar advanced to Mardj-al-Uskuf, where he was intercepted by the emperor. Michael III, in a delaying action, destroyed much of 'Omar's force but suffered heavy losses and was not able to stop his progress. 'Omar 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<sup>23</sup> but was overtaken and killed. Thus there is no disagreement about the topography of 'Omar'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,<sup>24</sup> on the

<sup>21</sup> *art.cit.* (*supra* n.11) 121.

<sup>22</sup> Ṭabarī, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.18).

<sup>23</sup> Skylitzes (p.100,55 ed. J. Thurn) says that he was making for Melitene—a reasonable inference.

<sup>24</sup> An officer having the family name Lalakon was *επαρχηγός* 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):<sup>25</sup>

... χαίροις ἄναξ, τοῦ στρατοῦ σου ἡ ἀνδρία·  
 χαίροις ἄναξ, δι' οὗ ὁ δεῖνα (sc. \*Αμερ) κατεπτύθη·  
 χαίροις ἄναξ, ὁ δεῖνα (sc. \*Αμερ) καθαιρέτα·  
 ὁ Θεός σε φυλάξει ἐν τῇ πορφύρᾳ εἰς τιμὴν καὶ ἀνέγερσιν τῶν  
 Ῥωμαίων σὺν ταῖς τιμίαις ἀγούσαις ἐν τῇ πορφύρᾳ·  
 εἰσακούσει ὁ Θεὸς τοῦ λαοῦ ὑμῶν.

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*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).

<sup>25</sup> *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 *Ἀκτα ἐπὶ μεγιστάνῳ ἀμειρᾷ ἐν πολέμῳ ἡττηθέντι καὶ ἀναιρεθέντι*. Notably absent from Greek and Arab accounts of the fighting in 863 is the ally of 'Omar, the Paulician leader Karbeas of Tephrike, but he may already have been on his death-bed 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, 'Ali-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 Ṭabarī (Vasiliev, *op.cit.* 325).