



## Summary :

On September 3, 863 the military forces of the emir of Melitene Amr al-Aqta joined battle with those of Petronas, strategos of the theme of Thrakesion in a place called Poson, close to the Lalakaon River. The Arab army, surrounded by the Byzantines, was decimated and Amr al-Aqta was killed. This Byzantine victory is an important turning point for the dominance over Asia Minor.

## Date

September 3, 863

## Geographical Location

Poson, Lalakaon river; on the borders between the themes of Armeniakon and Paphlagonia

## 1. Historical context

In the summer of 863 Amr al-Aqta, emir of [Melitene](#), joined forces with Ja' far, probably the emir of [Tarsus](#),<sup>1</sup> in order to launch a joint [campaign](#) against the Byzantine Empire. The large Arab army,<sup>2</sup> in which probably also participated [Paulicians](#) under their leader [Karbeas](#), left Tarsus and passing through the Cilician Gates entered [Cappadocia](#), making camp in an area which in the Arab sources is called al-Matamir, close to [Tyana](#).<sup>3</sup> From then on the emir of Melitene decided to move independently.<sup>4</sup> He headed north along with his troops, towards the area which in the Arab sources is called Mardj al-Usqf, (i.e. Bishop's Meadow), close to [Malakopi](#), north of Nazianzos, where he joined battle for the first time with emperor Michael III (842-867) and suffered great losses.<sup>5</sup> This did not, however, thwart Amr al-Aqta's march, who with the rest of his army headed further north pillaging the lands of the [theme of Armeniakon](#) and reaching as far as the coasts of the [Black Ssea](#), where he captured the important port of [Amisos](#) (modern Samsun in Turkey).<sup>6</sup> As soon as Michael III was informed of this in Constantinople he raised a large army<sup>7</sup> drawn from the eastern and western themes, giving its command to his uncle [Petronas](#), [strategos](#) of the [theme of Thrakesion](#) who was also a [domestikos ton scholon](#),<sup>8</sup> in order to immediately oust the Arabs from the territories of the Empire. A large part of this army had already participated in the Battle of Mardj al-Usqf and, after that victory, followed the invaders from a distance, according to the Byzantine [tactic](#). The news that a large army had been mobilized against him reached the emir of Melitene when he was still in Amisos. Disregarding the advice of his officials to avoid giving battle and choose another return [route](#),<sup>9</sup> Amr al-Aqta decided to stick to his original plan and moved his forces to the west. Finally, early in September he met the Byzantine troops on the borders between the themes of Armeniakon and [Paphlagonia](#), more specifically at a site called Poson, close to the Lalakaon River.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. The battle

The strategy that Petronas adopted in battle against the Arabs consisted in surrounding the enemy, in order to launch a simultaneous attack on all sides. Thus, the [strategoï](#) of Armeniakon,<sup>11</sup> [Boukellarion](#),<sup>12</sup> Koloneia and Paphlagonia moved to the north, while the [strategoï](#) of [Anatolikon](#), [Opsikion](#) and [Cappadocia](#), together with the [kleisourarchs](#) of [Seleukeia](#) and Charsianon moved to the south. The [strategoï](#) of Thrace and Macedonia together with the soldiers of Thrakesion and of the four imperial [tagmata](#) took up positions in the west, under the direct command of Petronas. During the night before the battle, Petronas ordered a Byzantine contingent to take control of a hillock in the area, which was of strategic importance, so as to cut off the Arabs' only way out. The operation was successful, notwithstanding enemy attempts to control this hill. The next day, September 3, 863 the combined Byzantine attacks from north, south and west began. When the Arab emir realized the grave danger he was in, he rallied all his forces on the west side and attempted to break through the Byzantines lines at that point and escape. This attempt failed, however, and the trapped Arab army was almost totally annihilated. Amr al-Aqta fell fighting and the leader of the Paulicians, Karbeas, probably lost also his life in battle.<sup>13</sup> The emir's son was the sole who managed to escape; he crossed with a small contingent the Halys River and made his way southeast, towards the [kleisoura](#) of Charsianon. Machairas, the [kleisourarch](#) of Charsianon, chased him down and soon after managed to capture him and hand him over, together with his soldiers, to Petronas.



### 3. Consequences

The crushing defeat of the Arabs in Lalakaon, which ended a great campaign by the emir of Melitene and led to the decimation of his army and his own death, did more than to undermine the morale and warlike brunt of the Arabs.<sup>14</sup> Apart from the fact that for a short term it bolstered Byzantine morale and strength, it also marked an important turning point in the history of the [Arab-Byzantine conflict](#). Up to then Byzantine efforts were mainly limited to a war of survival and then a defensive war against the Arabs. From now on, however, the empire begins its counteroffensive, which gradually becomes intense and reaches its peak during the second half of the 10th century, when Byzantine rule over the majority of Asia Minor becomes firmly established. After their victory over the emir of Melitene, the Byzantines moved east and, after crossing the Euphrates, attacked the Arab emir Alī ibn Yahya in [Armenia](#).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the shift of balance in favour of the Byzantines in the East allowed them to turn their attention to the Balkans and the threat of the Bulgarians, Russians, and Slavs. After returning victorious to Constantinople and making a glorious triumph,<sup>16</sup> Petronas was honoured by Michael III for his achievement with the title of *magistros*.<sup>17</sup>

1. See Huxley, G., "The Emperor Michael III and the Battle of Bishop's Meadow (A.D. 863)", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 16 (1975), p. 448, and Belke, K., *Tabula Imperii Byzantini 9: Paphlagonien und Honorias* (Wien 1996), p. 77, who accepted the earlier view of Bury, J., *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire* (London 1912), p. 283.
2. According to the continuators of Theophanes, *Χρονογραφία*, I. Bekker (ed.), *Theophanes Continuatus* (Bonn 1838), p. 179, 14, and Joseph Genesios, *Βασιλεῖαι*, ed. A. Lesmuller-Werner -I. Thurn, *Iosephi Genesii Regum Libri Quattuor* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 14, Berlin-New York 1978), pp. 67, 67, the forces of the emir of Melitene numbered 40,000 men.
3. Huxley, G., "The Emperor Michael III and the Battle of Bishop's Meadow (A.D. 863)", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 16 (1975), p. 448.
4. According to Treadgold, W. T., *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford 1997), p. 452, caliph al-Musta' in was the one who ordered a raid against Cappadocia and when the main Arab army retreated from the Byzantine lands, Amr continued the campaign using his own forces.
5. Haldon, J. F., *The Byzantine Wars* (Stroud 2001), believes that the army under Michael III was made up of the *tagmata* and troops from the themes of Cappadocia and Charsianon.
6. Byzantine sources mention that in Amisos the emir imitated Xerxes and ordered the sea be wiped for it prevented him from continuing on his course. However this is probably a myth.
7. According to the Arab historian al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-l-Muluk*, ed. Barth J. et al. (Leiden 1879-1901, repr. Beirut 1965), it numbered 50,000 men.
8. According to the Arab historian al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-l-Muluk*, Barth J. et al. (eds), this campaign was led by emperor Michael III himself. Vasiliev, A. A., *Byzance et les Arabes 1: La dynastie d'Amorium (820-867)* (Corpus Bruxellense Historiae Byzantinae 1, Bruxelles 1968), p. 251, believes that this might actually be true but was suppressed by the Byzantine historians who were hostile towards Michael III.
9. Huxley, G., "The Emperor Michael III and the Battle of Bishop's Meadow (A.D. 863)", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 16 (1975), p. 449; Belke, K., *Tabula Imperii Byzantini 9: Paphlagonien und Honorias* (Wien 1996), p. 77.
10. The region of Poson and the Lalakaon River can not be identified with certitude. Gregoire, H., "Études sur le neuvième siècle", *Byzantion* 8 (1933), p. 534-539, suggests the identification of Lalakaon with the Almyros River, which is rejected by Vasiliev, A. A., *Byzance et les Arabes 1: La dynastie d'Amorium (820- 867)* (Corpus Bruxellense Historiae Byzantinae 1, Bruxelles 1968), p. 253, and Huxley, G., "The Emperor Michael III and the Battle of Bishop's Meadow (A.D. 863)", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 16 (1975), p. 445. Most scholars, however, believe that this is an area close to the Halys River, or to its north, according to Belke, K., *Tabula Imperii Byzantini 9: Paphlagonien und Honorias* (Wien 1996), p. 77, or to its west, according to Χριστοφιλοπούλου Αικατερίνη, *Βυζαντινή Ιστορία 2: 610-867* (Θεσσαλονίκη 1993), p. 216, or between this and Lalakaon, its tributary, according to Jenkins, R. J. H., *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries (AD 610-1071)* (London 1966), p. 162. Haldon, J. F., *The Byzantine Wars* (Stroud 2001), p. 84, speculates that the Lalakaon River is to be identified with the river today called Şehirmeydanı Çayı.



11. Perhaps the strategos of the theme of Armeniakon who participated in this operation was Theophylaktos, the same man who is mentioned in the letter of Photius dated between 858 and 867. See Βλυσιδου Βασιλική – Κουντούρα Ταλάκη Ελεονώρα - Λαμπάκης Σ., - Λουγγής Τ. - Σαββίδης Α., *Η Μικρά Ασία των Θεμάτων: Έρευνες πάνω στην γεωγραφική φυσιογνωμία και προσωπογραφία των βυζαντινών θεμάτων της Μικράς Ασίας (7ος-11ος αι.)* (Ερευνητική Βιβλιοθήκη 1, Αθήνα 1998), p. 125.
12. The general of the theme of Boukellarion was called Nasar. See Συνεχιστὴς Γεωργίου Μοναχοῦ , *Βίοι τῶν νέων βασιλέων*, I. Bekker (ed.), *Georgius Monachus Continuatus* (Bonn 1838), 825, 2.
13. Such a possibility is thought propable by Vasiliev, A. A., *Byzance et les Arabes I: La dynastie d'Amorium (820-867)* (Corpus Bruxellense Historiae Byzantinae 1, Bruxelles 1968), p. 256, as 863 is mentioned as Karbeas' date of death. See also Jenkins, R. J. H., *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries (AD 610-1071)* (London 1966), p. 162; Hild, F. — Restle, M., *Tabula Imperii Byzantini 2: Kappadokien (Kappadokia, Charsianon, Sebasteia und Lykandos)* (Wien 1981), p. 80; Hild, F. — Hellenkemper, H., *Tabula Imperii Byzantini 5: Kilikien und Isaurien* (Wien 1990), p. 51.; Treadgold, W. T., *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford 1997), p. 452, believes it is equally possible that he was killed soon after, during the battle of the Byzantines against emir Ali. On the contrary, Lemerle, P., "L'histoire des Pauliciens d'Asie Mineure d'après les sources grecques", *Travaux et Mémoires* 5 (1973), pp. 92-96, argues that neither Karbeas nor the Paulicians participated in the emir's campaign in the summer of 863 and believes that, if the leader of the Paulicians did indeed die in 863, he died of natural causes and not in battle.
14. This victory was considered to be the Byzantine's revenge for the sack of Amorion in 838. Indicative is the impact of the victory as documented on the Byzantine hagiological texts, the epic poetry and the songs of the Constantinopolitan demes of that era.
15. In the battle that took place between October 18 and November 16 863, the Arab army was defeated, while Alī ibn Yahya lost his life.
16. If we accept the version offered by the Arab historian al-Tabari, emperor Michael III returned also with Petronas.
17. Χριστοφιλοπούλου, Αικ., *Βυζαντινή Ιστορία 2: 610-867* (Θεσσαλονίκη<sup>2</sup> 1993), p. 217, mentions that he took the office of domestikos.

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## Webliography :

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## Glossary :

	<b>domestikos</b>
	A term that during Byzantine times denoted a wide array of ecclesiastic, civil and military officials. In church hierarchy the domestikoi were in charge of special groups connected with liturgical rites, such as lectors, sub-deacons but mainly cantors. In the military chain of command during the 6th and 8th century the domestikoi were the commanders of the <i>tagmata</i> , the regiments under the direct command of the Emperor.
	<b>emir</b>
	(from Arabic amir) Emir meaning "commander" or "general", later also "prince". Also a high title of nobility or office in some Turkic historical states.
	<b>kleisoura</b>
	(lat. clausura) Byzantine military term. Kleisoura initially designated a mountain passage; from the 7 <sup>th</sup> c. onwards it also meant the military unit responsible for the defence of the passage. The term is also used for an administrative division (smaller than the theme). Its base was in a rough site



close to the border, and its administration and economy was not necessarily the jurisdiction of the strategos of the theme. It is considered as the evolution of *tourma*.

#### kleisourarch

(and *kleisourarch*) a Byzantine term denoting the commander of a *kleisoura* or a *kleisarchy*. These were military units responsible for the defence of mountain passes; the term is also used to designate an administrative unit smaller than the theme.

#### magistros

Higher office that Philotheos in his *Kletorologion* places above the anthypatos. This title lost its importance from the 10th century and gradually disappeared - most probably in the middle of the 12th century.

#### strategos ("general")

During the Roman period his duties were mainly political. Office of the Byzantine state's provincial administration. At first the title was given to the military and political administrator of the themes, namely of the big geographic and administrative unities of the Byzantine empire. Gradually the title lost its power and, already in the 11th century, strategoi were turned to simple commanders of military units, responsible for the defence of a region.

#### tagmata (pl.)

Military units stationed in Constantinople and its outskirts during the Middle Byzantine period. The most important tagmata were that of the Scholae, the Excubitors (these originated from respective units of the Early Byzantine period and were organized into an imperial guard and a central strike force by Constantine V), the Vigilia (established by Irene the Athenian) and the Hikanatoi (established by Nicephorus I).

#### triumph

The organising of festivities in Constantinople in order to celebrate the return of the emperor (or a military commander) from a victorious expedition. It included a military parade, lead by the emperor and his generals, followed by prisoners and plunder brought back from occupied territories, as well as games at the Hippodrome. The people of the capital (mainly the demes) usually participated in overwhelming numbers and with great enthusiasm.

## Sources

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## Quotations

The chronographer Symeon Magistros describes the battle of Lalakaon (863)

τὸν δὲ Ἄμερ πάλιν ἐξελθόντα κατὰ Ῥωμανίας στρατηλάτης ὦν τῆς ἀνατολῆς Πετρωνᾶς καὶ Νάσαρ τῶν Βουκελλαρίων λοχῆσαντες τὴν ὁδὸν τῆς ὑποστροφῆς αὐτοῦ συναντῶσιν αὐτῶ εἰς τὸν Λαλακάωνα καὶ συμβολῆς γενομένης τρέπουσιν Ἄμερ, καὶ φυγῇ χρησάμενον καταδιώκει αὐτὸν τις τῶν κομήτων καὶ τούτου τὴν κεφαλὴν ἄρας ἤγαγε Πετρωνᾶ στρατηλάτη. εἰσελθόντες δὲ οἱ στρατηγοὶ μετὰ ἐπινικίων ἐθριάμβευσαν ταῦτα ἐν τῷ ἱππικῶ, καὶ ἔκτοτε ἐγένετο γαλήνη μεγάλη ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ διὰ τὴν τοῦ Ἄμερ σφαγὴν.

Wahlgren, S. (ed.), *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon* (CFHB 44/1, Berlin-New York 2006), pp. 243.224 - 244.231.

The battle of Lalakaon related in a byzantine historical work

τούτου ταῖς εὐχαῖς καθοπλισθεὶς κατὰ τινὰ τόπον οὕτω λεγόμενον Πόσοντα, φυσικὴν τινὰ ἀσφάλειαν διὰ πετρῶν ἔχοντα καὶ κρημνῶν, τὸν Ἄμερ καταλαμβάνει πανστρατιᾶ. τούτῳ καὶ ποταμὸς παραρρεῖ ἀπὸ τῶ ἀρκτῶν πρὸς τὸ μεσημβρινὸν ἐλαυνόμενος, Λαλακῶν ὀνομαζόμενος, καὶ λιβάδιον παράκειται Γύριν ἀγροικικὴ φωνῆ καλούμενον. ἔγνω γοῦν ὁ Πετρωνᾶς ἐκεῖσε τοῦτον ἐναυλιζόμενον, καὶ πάντῃ ἔσπευδεν ἀδιεξόδευτὸν τε καταστῆσαι καὶ ἄφυκτον. καὶ δὴ τοὺς μὲν τὸ ἀρκτῶν μέρος καθέξοντας στρατηγοὺς τῶν Ἀρμενιακῶν καὶ Βουκελλαρίων καὶ Κολωνείας καὶ Παφλαγονίας ἐπέστειλεν αὐθωρόν, τὸ δὲ μεσημβρινὸν τὸν Ἀνατολικῶν τὸν Ὀψικίου καὶ Καππαδοκίας στρατηγοὺς σὺν τοῖς Σελευκείας καὶ τοῦ Χαρσιανοῦ κλεισουράρχαις· αὐτὸς δὲ μετὰ



τῶν βασιλικῶν τεσσάρων ταγμάτων καὶ τῶν Θράκης καὶ Μακεδονίας στρατηγῶν (καὶ γὰρ εἰρηνευόντων τῶν Βουλγάρων νόμος ἦν αὐτοῖς μετὰ τῶν Ἀνατολικῶν συγκινδυνεύειν καὶ συστρατεύειν) τὸ δυτικὸν μέρος κατέλιπεν, ἔχων καὶ τὸ θέμα τῶν Θρακησίων μεθ' ἑαυτοῦ. ὡς γοῦν οὕτω πάντοθεν περιφρουρεῖσθαι καὶ ὡς θηρίον ἐναποκεκλεισθαι παρὰ Ῥωμαίων ὁ Ἄμερ ἀκήκοεν, ἔγνω δεῖν οἰωνίσασθαι, καὶ τινα τῶν αἰχμαλώτων μετακαλεσάμενος ἠρώτα τὴν τε τοῦ τόπου προσηγορίαν καὶ τοῦ λιβαδίου τε καὶ τοῦ ποταμοῦ. ὡς δ' ὁ ἐρωτηθεὶς αἰχμάλωτος μικρὸν παραγραμματίζων Πτώσοντα ἔφησεν ἀντὶ Πόσοντα, τὴν ἑαυτοῦ σημαίνειν πτώσιν ὁ Ἄμερ διεσάφησεν, λαοῦ τε κάκωσιν παραφράζων τὸν ποταμόν, καὶ γυρισθῆναι δεινῶς αὐτοὺς παρὰ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἐκ τῆς τοῦ λιβαδίου συνεμπτώσεως, ὅπερ ἐκαλεῖτο Γῦριν. «ἀλλ' ὅμως οὐκ ἀποκνητέον» φησὶν, «ἀλλὰ διεγερτέον καὶ πρὸς τὸν αὔριον γενησόμενον πόλεμον ἀνδριστέον». καὶ ἅμα ὀπλίζεσθαι πάντας καὶ νεόσμηκτα δεικνύειν ὡς νεουργὰ τὰ ξίφη ἐκέλευσεν. ἐπεὶ δὲ ἡμέρα ἄρτι ἐξανατέλλουσα τὴν ὅπως περιγένηται τοὺς Ῥωμαίους ἀνοχὴν ἐπέφερον, δεῖν ἔκρινε πρὸς μὲν τὸ ἀρκτῶν φυλάττοντας τὴν ἐξοδὸν αὐτῶ ἐκζητεῖν, ὡς δ' ἦ τε τοῦ τόπου κακία καὶ τῶν ἐκεῖσε ταχθέντων στρατηγῶν εὐανδρία ἀπήντα τοῦτον καὶ διεκώλυεν, ἐπὶ τὸ μεσημβρινὸν ὀρμᾶσθαι ἐξεβιάζετο. ὡς δὲ κάκειθεν τὴν ὁμοίαν εὗρισκεν τῶν ἐναντίων παράταξιν, ἔγνω δεῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ τόπου ἐφελκόμενος (καὶ γὰρ ἦν λειὸς καὶ εὐπρόσιτος) τῶν λοιπῶν κατ' ἐκείνον μᾶλλον χωρεῖν, ἢ καὶ τὸν Πετρωνᾶν ἑώρα κατασκηνοῦμενον καὶ φυλάττοντα. καὶ δὴ κρότῳ καὶ βοῇ κατὰ τῶν πολεμίων ἐφαλλόμενος οὐδ' ὅλας εἴκοντας τοὺς Ῥωμαίους ἐφεύρισκεν, ἀλλ' ἰσχυροτέρους καὶ αὐτὸν ἀνδρικῶς ἀντικρούοντας καὶ μᾶλλον ἀνθισταμένους νεανικῶς· διὸ καὶ μικρὸν συσταλεῖς καὶ εἰς ἑαυτὸν αὐθις γενόμενος ἐπεβάρει πάλιν μετὰ δυνάμεως, ἐκπόρευσιν τινα καὶ κάθοδον ἑαυτῶ ποριζόμενος. ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐθις τούτῳ οὐκ ἐνδόντες ἀλλ' ὑπαντήσαντες καὶ ἀναστρέψαντες τῷ συμπεφράχθαι, καὶ μέχρις τούτων τοῦτο ποιεῖν κατηνάγκασαν. ἐπεὶ δὲ πάντοθεν ἀναφανέντας καὶ ἄλλους ἄλλοθεν ἐκπηδῶντας τοὺς τὰ ἀρκτῶα καὶ μεσημβρινὰ μέρη κατοικοῦντας καθεώρακε, τότε ἤδη τὴν σωτηρίαν ἀπογνοὺς καὶ τὰς φρένας ὥσπερ τινὶ κεραυνῷ βληθεὶς ἐχώρει κατὰ ξιφῶν, οὐδὲ προτέρων ἀμελῶν· ἐνθα καιρίαν πληγὴν αὐτὸς τε πτώμα γίνεται χαλεπὸν, καὶ τῶν ἑαυτοῦ διασώζεται οὐδεὶς οὐδαμοῦ. ὡς δὲ τὸν τούτου νίον μετὰ τινος φάλαγγος ἀποδρᾶναί που διήκουον, καὶ τοῦτον ὁ τοῦ Χαρσιανοῦ κλεισουράρχης καταλαβὼν οὐκ ἄποθεν χειροῦται τε μετὰ τοῦ στρατεύματος καὶ τῷ στρατηγῷ φέρων δίδωσι Πετρωνᾶ.

Bekker, I. (ed.), *Theophanes Continuatus* (CSHB, Bonn 1838), pp. 181.4 - 183.10.

## Chronological Table

Summer of 863: The emir of Melitene launches his campaign against the Byzantine lands of Asia Minor

September 3, 863: Battle of Lalakaon (or Poson) between the emir of Melitene and the Byzantine forces under Petronas. Defeat of the Arabs