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## Persian Riders in the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus. A reliable source?

**Keywords:** The *Aethiopika*, Heliodorus, Iran, heavy cavalry, *cataphracti*

The *Aethiopika* (Αἰθιοπικά) of Heliodorus<sup>1</sup> is a masterpiece of late antique romance. It represents a genre of long and gorgeous tradition of romance and adventure novel-writing in antiquity, the genre marked with masterpieces like Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, Longos' *Daphnis and Chloe*, works of Apuleius and Lukian, to name only the most renown and remarkable milestones.

The story describes the adventures of Charicleia, a white-skinned daughter of Ethiopian king Hydaspes and his wife Persinna who watched at a painting representing fair-skinned Andromeda during an intercourse with her husband, and Theagenes, a noble Greek youth who fell in love and went through numerous adventures which led them from Greece through Egypt to Ethiopia where they were almost sacrificed to the gods but finally recognized, saved and married.

The action is placed during the times of Achaemenid rule in Egypt and is full of surprising twists, dramatic suspense however in comparison to other works of the genre the supernatural interventions are used in moderation. Although the heroes of the story explain all dire adventures with the will of deities the latter do not reveal themselves directly, the supernatural sphere is mostly limited to the sphere of dreams and their interpretation and presence of an amulet protecting the heroine from fire. Nevertheless, entire novel is placed firmly within the frames of the genre. Its conventional nature does not raise any doubts, even the play within the conventions, conscious intertextual play with former romances seems a part of the game which has the purpose of entertaining the reader<sup>2</sup>. The goal has been achieved perfectly as the novel was still popular and inspiring in modern times not only to the students

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\* The results of the research carried out under the research theme No. 452/16/S (Army of ancient Iran in comparative background) and No. 133/15/MN were financed from the science grant granted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education; Institute of History and International Relations, Faculty of Humanities; varaz777@yahoo.com

\*\* The results of the research carried out under the research theme No. 452/16/S (Army of ancient Iran in comparative background) were financed from the science grant granted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education; Institute of History and International Relations, Faculty of Humanities; szapur2@poczta.onet.pl, ORCID iD 0000-0001-8709-0333.

<sup>1</sup> τὰ περὶ Θεαγένην καὶ Χαρίκλειαν "Ethiopian Story Concerning Theagenes and Charicleia"

<sup>2</sup> WINKLER 1982: 158.

of antiquity<sup>3</sup>. Its conventional character can be observed on composition level where straight narration is avoided, story within story model applied together with sudden surprising situations does not allow to predict the chain of events, and the supreme function is amusement of reader<sup>4</sup>.

The conventional character of the text is not denied by the Author who often uses theatrical metaphors referring to technical means of new characters on stage (*deus ex machina*) but also to the very perception of described scenes, views and personages. Although vivid, detailed and three dimensional, the descriptions normally leave impression of calling the works of art or performances rather than events. Convention is present in the text on all layers, from the construction, through stylistic means to the very names of the personages. Charicleia, the name of Heliodorus' stout virgin heroine, fighting with wit and even in actual combat against the obstacles, to remain until wedding night with Theagenes, was also the name of lustful, negative personage of Lucian<sup>5</sup>. This clearly points the conscious game with convention and with the corpus of the genre, played by Heliodorus. Hydaspes, the name of Charicleia's Ethiopian father is naturally the name of the river in India where Alexander fought his battle with Poros and in ancient geography India had southern land connection with Africa. Name of Oroondates' wife Arsace refers clearly to the Parthian dynasty and the Thracian personage is named Rodope. As most of ancient authors, Heliodorus does not leave the set of stock images available to an educated inhabitant of Roman Empire. That is why Ethiopian plains are filled with the herds of gryphons and the gryphon-drawn cart is offered to Hydaspes by the Troglodytes<sup>6</sup>. The Author is not allowed to leave the area of ancient erudition, his aim is to amuse the reader with surprising setting of the known elements<sup>7</sup> and not to educate.

Strict following the rules of the genre makes dating of the work difficult. The work has been dated either to early 3<sup>rd</sup> or mid 4<sup>th</sup> century CE<sup>8</sup>. The former date is based on the emphasized role of sun-veneration in the novel which was found a clue pointing to the times of the Severan dynasty (193-235). Rightfully this argument can be countered by fact that the popularity of the solar cults was not limited to early 3<sup>rd</sup> century and example of Julian's veneration of Helios was made a strong counter-argument (361-363)<sup>9</sup>. It should be also borne in mind that the very name of the Author of the novel was associated with the sun-god so accentuated solar cults might be part of his former experience or be a kind of sublimed artistic game within the frames of convention. The latter date, with which majority of modern scholar agree, is based on the similarities between described in the novel siege of Syene and records of the siege of Nisibis in 350<sup>10</sup>. Alleged elements of Christian ethics found in the *Aethiopica* were explained by the creed of the Author and hiding them behind

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<sup>3</sup> BLACK 2011: 344.

<sup>4</sup> GRETHLEIN 2015.

<sup>5</sup> TAGLIABUE 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Heliod. X, 309: "After them came men of Troglodytis bringing powdered gold and a pair of gryphons harnessed in golden reins".

<sup>7</sup> KRUCHIÓ 2017: 192.

<sup>8</sup> SZEPESSY 1976; SANDY 1982: 2-5; KEYDELL 1984; CHUVIN 1990; BOWERSOCK 1994; PERKINS 1999: 210-214; ELMER 2008: 418; FUTRE PINHEIRO 2014.

<sup>9</sup> HILTON 2012.

<sup>10</sup> ROSS 2014.

ancient entourage was explained by an attempt of avoiding persecutions<sup>11</sup>. It is true that Fotius mentioned that Heliodorus was to become a bishop under condition of burning of his novel but at the same time we need to remember that he refused to do so<sup>12</sup>. Also, as far as the persecutions of the third century were indeed a fatal threat, Julian's competition with Christianity is an incomparable phenomenon, it is enough to remind that open criticism of the Christian population of Antioch inspired the emperor to write *Mysopogon*. Equally well, one might imagine *Aethiopica* being written during Julian's reign in line with his idea of "reformed paganism" which accentuated high moral standards. Frequent mention of the solar cult by Heliodorus might find an analogy in Julian's sun-cult, therefore entire "Christian" morality might as well be perceived within the frames of Apostate's grand program. This would also explain why Heliodorus was to be required to burn the book as the condition to ordain bishop (if the remark in Fotius is historical) which would hardly be requested if the book indeed was read as form of propagation of Christianity in pre-Christian disguise. It should be pointed out that Philostratus' *Vita Apollonii* (firmly dated to Severan era)<sup>13</sup>, however not representing genre of romance novel, presented the image of virtuous pagan ascetic, the image promoting high moral standards in pagan milieu. The fact remains that the date of the *Aethiopica* remains uncertain and disputable because of its perfectly conventional character. All the difficulties of dating the novel and even attributing it to any real ideological sphere come from its perfect fitting into genre and that although the action is declared to take place in Achaemenid Egypt, in fact it takes place "in an alien world"<sup>14</sup> in adventure land to use Bakhtin's phrase about the *Aethiopica*. The novel's high literary quality and illusive veracity of descriptions made Ross to suggest that: "Heliodorus alludes to the practices of the genre that makes the greatest claim to represent events that take place in the <real world>"<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, suggestive prose of Heliodorus allows to believe that he might have seen the gryphons bridled with the curbs made of gold mined by the ants or mother talking to her dead son brought to life through necromancy, the moments which lack neither details nor dramatism. Heliodorus is equally convincing in description of the events which he might have experienced as purely imaginative. The moment when Theogenes is brought to the face of Arsace would find direct visual comparison on the silver-gilt plate from Strelka<sup>16</sup> if we decide to replace the king with the female personage. It is easier to assume that Heliodorus was aware of Persian court practices from the written or even visual sources than expect his actual visit at the Iranian court. Also, the siege of Syene although resembling descriptions of Šāpur II's stratagem used at Nisibis, it is unlikely to believe that Heliodorus witnessed the struggle by Nisibis. In his description the Persians are besieged and, unlike with Nisibis, Syene is being finally captured by the army of victorious Hydaspes however Persian army manages to flee thanks to another stratagem of Oroondates. As entire novel, the description of the siege seems to refer to an element known to a reader. Clever, extraordinary but familiar. The history

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<sup>11</sup> KOWALSKI 2016

<sup>12</sup> Photius, *Bibliotheca*, cod. 73.

<sup>13</sup> KEMEZIS 2014.

<sup>14</sup> BAKHTIN 2002: 19.

<sup>15</sup> ROSS, 2014 : 1.

<sup>16</sup> Hermitage inv. S-250.

of repelled siege of Nisibis must have been wide-spread especially in light of the unorthodox means of warfare applied there.

It should be pointed out in this place that Nisibis was besieged by Šāpur's twice. For the first time in 337 or 338 and for the second time in 350. The majority of the scholars associates the battle of Syene with the siege of 350 however the description of Ammianus Marcellinus does not refer any kind of "aquatic warfare" and it would be reasonable to expect it whenever sieges of the cities located by the rivers occurred if the event was so profound. What is more important, in case of the first siege Theodoret<sup>17</sup> provided a concise overview of Šāpur's hydro-warfare at Nisibis which could be associated with the description of Heliodorus<sup>18</sup>. This could move the *terminus post quem* of the novel from 350 to 337/8.

What seems interesting from methodological point of view is that the scholars working on the *Aethiopica* rarely even notice the presence of the passage dedicated to description of Persian heavy cavalry<sup>19</sup>. Dworacki just mentions it among number of Iranian exotica in Egyptian part of the story<sup>20</sup>, Hilton finds entire description of the battle of Elephantine "detailed but entirely literary" and points to its dependence on Xenophon's description of the battle of Thymbara<sup>21</sup>. Other authors researching *Aethiopica* are focused on various aspects of the novel ignore that fragment. On the other hand the students of Iranian history and Iranian armament keenly, and without further thought about its context, quote the description as a reliable source of the actual picture of armament, tactics and combat technique of Sasanian armored cavalry<sup>22</sup>. Given the shortage of sources such approach might be not surprising however Heliodorus' description deserves closer and more critical look.

### **The helmets of Persian armored riders in the *Aethiopica***

The warriors under Oroondates' command are described as wearing "a close helmet made in one piece fitting as tightly as a mask. This covereth his head down to his shoulders, saving that there be holes left for him to look out of."<sup>23</sup> The masks

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<sup>17</sup> Theodoret, *Historia religiosa*, I 11-12: "Shapur stopped up the course of the river which flowed past the city and when as vast an amount as possible of the accumulating water had piled up behind the dam he released it all at once against the walls, using it like a tremendously powerful battering-ram. The wall could not withstand the force of the water, and indeed, badly shaken by the flood, the whole stretch of that side of the city collapsed".

<sup>18</sup> Heliod. IX, 261: "He left between the two ends of the trench a space one hundred feet broad which he ditched to the Nile, bringing the same ever from the lower ground to that which was more high. A man might have likened the work to a long wall, because it kept always a hundred feet in breadth; and was as long as the space between Syene and the Nile. When he had brought this ditch to the banks of the Nile he let into it the water from the river, which in falling from a higher place into a lower and out of the wonderful breadth of the Nile into a narrow trench wrought by hand made a great noise, both at the entry thereto and also in the ditch, so that they might hear it who were a great way off. Which when those who were in Syene saw and understood unto what danger they were brought, because he meant by so encompassing them about to drown their town".

<sup>19</sup> Heliod. IX, 273.

<sup>20</sup> DWORACKI 2009: 138.

<sup>21</sup> HILTON 2005: 77.

<sup>22</sup> DIGNAS, WINTER 2007: 63-64; DODGEON, LIEU 1991: 209-210; FARROKH 2005: 17, 19, 27; MIELCZAREK 1993: 27-28, 46, 50, 60, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Heliod. IX, 273.

of the Persian heavy cavalry are also mentioned several times by Ammianus Marcellinus<sup>24</sup> and in a reference to Constantius' *clibanarii* by Julian Apostate<sup>25</sup>. At the same time none of the preserved helmets attributed as Sasanian or depicted on Sasanian art has either a mask or even place to fit it. The only artwork which undoubtedly shows Sasanian warrior with face protection is the sculpture of the rider in large grotto at Tāq-e Bostān<sup>26</sup>. The crude graffiti from Dura Europos<sup>27</sup> are difficult to interpret however the most renowned one, depicting charging armored rider, either does not show any form of face protection (than the neck and sides of head would be covered by the mail) or shows mail aventail similar to the one from Tāq-e Bostān. Popularity of masked helmets among Roman cavalry cannot be denied, however they were definitely not restricted to the heavy armored units and were never made "made in one piece"<sup>28</sup>. The only single-piece helmet with the face mask is known from depiction on the metope of Athena temple from Pergamum, predating discussed period with over half millennium. Roman face masks belonging to the helmets were found in cultural vicinity of Iran – in Nisibis and Himyarite Yemen where Iranian heavy cavalry traditions were cultivated probably starting from the Parthian era<sup>29</sup> which might suggest that imported Roman cavalry masks were employed or late Hellenistic were still in use. Taking under consideration appearance of the Parthian and even Achaemenid armour in Plutarchus<sup>30</sup>, it is easier to believe that this form of face protection among Iranian warriors was another literary convention. It is a fact that Ammianus Marcellinus was an eye-witness of the events which he was describing so seems the most reliable source however at the same time his history was an erudite work and his testimonies often refer to earlier literature<sup>31</sup>, also it must be born in mind that convention or *topos* is as much enforced by the audience as by the author. It is author's role to make the information understandable and acceptable to the reader and as educated citizen of Late Roman Empire Ammianus has never contradicted the classics. Also, it should be borne in mind that the masked helmets do not "cover

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<sup>24</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, XXV 1. 12: "and the forms of human faces were so skilfully fitted to their heads, that, since their entire bodies were plated with metal, arrows that fell upon them could lodge only where they could see a little through tiny openings fitted to the circle of the eye, or where through the tips of their noses they were able to get a little breath".

<sup>25</sup> Julian, Orationes, I 30: "The head and face are covered by a metal mask which makes its wearer look like a glittering statue".

<sup>26</sup> MODE 2006, FARROKH, KARAMIAN, MAKSYMCIUK 2018: Fig. 40.

<sup>27</sup> SKUPNIEWICZ 2006: 165; FARROKH, KARAMIAN, MAKSYMCIUK 2018: Fig. 18.

<sup>28</sup> NEGIN 2010: 77-154; NARLOCH 2011.

<sup>29</sup> SKUPNIEWICZ 2016: 57-75.

<sup>30</sup> Plut., *Crass.* 24 1: "While the Romans were in consternation at this din, suddenly their enemies dropped the coverings of their armour, and were seen to be themselves blazing in helmets and breastplates, their Margianian steel glittering keen and bright, and their horses clad in plates of bronze and steel". Also, Masistius' armour in description of the battle of Platea. Herodotus just mentions that after killing his horse Masistius was killed by the spear thrust in his eye because of his body armor but Plutarchos already added to the description the protective visor. "Presently the horse of Masistius was hit with an arrow, and threw his rider, who lay where he fell, unable to raise himself, so heavy was his armour; and yet he was no easy prey to the Athenians, though they pressed upon him and smote him. For not only his chest and head, but also his limbs were encased in gold and bronze and iron. But at last, with the spike of a javelin, through the eye-hole of his helmet, he was smitten to the death, and the rest of the Persians abandoned his body and fled", Plut., *Aristides* 14 5.

<sup>31</sup> For instance in reference to geographic information: BARNES 1998: 95.

the head down to the shoulders” as was described by Heliodorus. In order to protect neck, the separate piece is required as this was clearly demonstrated by Negin and Kamisheva in their publication of the armors from Roshava Dragana, which they identified as belonging to Sarmatian cataphract. This inadequacy proves again that the language of the description is fully conventional and is ruled by the principles of literary *decorum* and not observed reality<sup>32</sup>.

The description in the *Aethiopica* does not mention any form of collar therefore entire idea of masked helmets might be a stylistic figure to describe the mail aventails, especially if the latter were reinforced by the nasals, an element well attested in Sasanian helmets from which it was adopted to late Roman armament. Naturally the presence of the face masks among Sasanian cavalry cannot be fully excluded and some warriors might have worn either the Roman imports (than not being integral to the helmet) or the remnants of Hellenistic past, however in *Aethiopica* they are an element of literary convention. Further fragment describing Ethiopian archers dealing with the Persians with precise shots to the eyes allowed Heliodorus to make witty comparison of the arrows sticking out of the eye-holes to *auloi* which only emphasizes fully conventional character of the description.

### **The armor of Persian riders in the *Aethiopica***

Heliodorus’ description of armors worn by the Persian riders does not seem fully consistent. He starts the description stating that “all his body is covered with a coat of mail. The mail is made thus. With pieces of brass and iron, as big as the palm of a man’s hand, they make a coat, as it were, of scales, laying the end and sides of each piece upon another – so that the nether part of one goeth over the top of the other – and then they sew them together, and this coat lieth upon every part of the body without any ado. It covers every limb”<sup>33</sup> which implicates that entire body is protected by the span by span squares however it is impossible to create flexible limbs protection of plates of this size. “It hath sleeves and reacheth from the neck down to the knees, saving that necessity compels it to be cut between the thighs, that the man may sit upon his horse”<sup>34</sup> which might be understood that the sleeves are excluded from the first part and perhaps are here a technical term corresponding to Latin *manica* meaning both a sleeve and flexible limb defense – a sleeve of laminated narrow straps of metal or hardened leather. The same can be addressed to the leg protection – at first Heliodorus states that the armor of large scales covers entire body and does not restrict the movement only later he explains that the coat enforced by iron and bronze sheets reaches down to knees and further the legs are protected by the greaves. When comparing the description with iconographic material it seems that Heliodorus attempted to describe two types of armors in one go. First he gave an impression of armored overall as we know from stylized depictions on Trajan’s column, crude illustrations on bronze plaque from Sana in Yemen<sup>35</sup>, the tile with the scene of armored

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<sup>32</sup> NEGIN, KAMISHEVA 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Heliod. IX, 273.

<sup>34</sup> Heliod. IX, 273.

<sup>35</sup> ANTONINI 2005.

rider combating a lion from Babylonia, now in British Museum<sup>36</sup>, then Heliodors seem to offer more details and describe a type of heavy armor of a type known from Khalchayan sculpture<sup>37</sup> or indo-scythian coinage<sup>38</sup>, the type of armor which consist of what can be interpret a as a coat covered with the relatively large squares (in fact torso part and protective skirt must have created separate parts). It is difficult to resist impression that Heliodorus could not fully decide which practice of describing Persian armors to select: the one concerning Parthians with emphasize on scale coverings or the later one accentuating metallic plates being craftily affixed to each other and not restricting the movement. The former had longer tradition while the latter seemed more modern or fashionable.

What must be emphasized, early Sasanian iconography does not offer depictions of any armors of that type. Royal rock reliefs show armored warriors wearing the armors which seem a development of Hellenistic tradition which consist of cuirasses, laminated or mail arm defenses, scale or mail skirts and segmental leggings. Even the famous graffito from Dura Europos is more likely showing certain type of “hybrid” armor which is distant from any of two possible types transmitted by Heliodorus. Also the greaves (*knemides*) are a unique part of armament among early Sasanian art pieces. The only depiction which might represent actual greaves and not laminated leggings is so-called seal of Šāpur<sup>39</sup> where plain surface on Persian rider’s shin could be interpreted as the greaves. The closet to the discussed type might be the armors depicted on sixth century *spāhbedan* seals which show the personages in what might be scale tunics reaching to the lower thigh however the objects are small and it is difficult to determine whether what appears scales was not intended to represent rings of chainmail<sup>40</sup>. Also the seals are at least two centuries later than the *Aethiopica*.

Equally ambiguous seems the horse armor in Heliodorus’ description. It consists of chanfron and elongated metallic pieces protecting sides and includes horse greaves. As far as chanfrons do not raise any controversy as they are well attested in Roman milieu and are present in iconography of Sasanian heavy horse, the role of the elongated pieces is unclear. It is difficult to determine whether they are long lamellae as known from the relief from Tang-e Sarvak<sup>41</sup> or a form of *pteryges* which was to protect the flanks and not disturb gallop, in light of the events of the battle they did not prove useful against the attacks of light armed Blemmyes pointing at horses’ bellies. The most peculiar is mention of horse greaves or *knemides*, a piece of barding never attested otherwise and difficult to imagine from horse anatomy perspective. Horse legs remained unprotected in all cultures employing barding, occasionally hooves were covered and reinforced and in anonymous Byzantine treatise these are mounts legs which are pointed as the targets for the foot archers receiving cavalry charge<sup>42</sup>. This weakness was occasionally diminished by extending of the peytral, as it can be observed on one of the relief at Tāq-e Bostān, but not by adding

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<sup>36</sup> British Museum inv. no. 91908.

<sup>37</sup> SKUPNIEWICZ 2014: 42.

<sup>38</sup> MITCHINER, 1976: 848d; SKUPNIEWICZ, LICHOTA 2017: 71.

<sup>39</sup> Médailles et Antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Numéro d’inventaire : camée.360.

<sup>40</sup> SKUPNIEWICZ 2017.

<sup>41</sup> MIELCZAREK 1993: 51-67; FARROKH, KARAMIAN, MAKSYMIOUK 2018: Fig. 12.

<sup>42</sup> DENNIS 1985, *Peri Strategias*, 108-111.

weight to horses' legs. It is the clearest example of Heliodorus attempting to transfer image of hoplite to image of horse, a consequence of employment of Homeric metaphor "men of bronze" towards heavy cavalry and logical extension of "statuary" qualities emphasized by himself. It should be also reminded that early Sasanian iconography shows the horses of the armored riders only in short caparisons and bardings of stiff material begun being depicted at the end of the period, also Ammianus Marcellinus confirms that the mounts of Sasanian heavy cavalry were wearing leather caparisons rather than metallic armor<sup>43</sup>.

Heliodorus' description of Persian armors, however suggestive, is far from detailed. In fact it seems a mixture of "stock phrases" which could be easily associated by the educated reader with other literary works. Usually modern scholars (Valk's article on date of the *Aethiopica* comes from 1940s<sup>44</sup> so can be called "modern" only in relative sense) employ the shared phrases to date the work correctly treating the technical and tactical descriptions as fixed literary *topoi*.

### **Lances. Tactics and combat technique**

The tactics and combat techniques described by Heliodorus are equally conventional as the military equipment and are a part of literary fiction with remote sources in reality. The Author describes the long lances or the *kontoi* being affixed to horse's neck and rump and held single-handed by the rider charging ferociously against enemy ranks. It would be tempting to see in such a device an ancestor of Polish hussars' tok or a strap with a loop fastened to the saddle which allowed balancing enormously long lance or kopia during a charge. Such a device would allow maximizing the strength of the thrust which allegedly allowed to transfix six enemies at one go. Despite the superficial resemblance of the combination of strap and long shaft combination these are clearly two different phenomena. The difference and the danger of such comparisons does not lay only in modest result of two transfixed opponent attested in ancient sources and repeated by Heliodorus but in entire tactical idea of the role of the heavy cavalry. Although its actual role remains obscure and disputable it should be noted that the idea of blind galloping into enemy ranks and smashing them through mere power is a literary or scholar fiction based on the paradigm of chivalric, late mediaeval charge inherited and developed by Polish hussars who in fact were able to withdraw the charge at the very last moment and charge again until the commanded decided that the contact is safe. Also, such an amassed charge was not the only tactic employed by the hussars who were efficient in various types of warfare including foot combat.

The frontal charge of European heavy cavalry with lances couched under armpit developed most likely in the course of the eleventh century and was adopted to Oriental art of war only as marginal element in tactical repertoire. The *Munyatu'l-ghuzāt*, fourteenth century Mameluke handbook of the lance wielding, describes the couched method as providing power but criticizes it for not allowing the rider to use the lance in defense<sup>45</sup>. Heliodorus does not even mention locking the lance under

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<sup>43</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, XXIV 6. 8.

<sup>44</sup> VAN DER VALK 1940.

<sup>45</sup> *Munyatu'l-ghuzāt*, 63-65.



armpit. What is more, he tells of the loop by mount's neck which would limit rapidly changing the angle of attack. The rider described in the *Aethiopica* is riding ahead hoping that his powerful thrust would pierce two opponents standing on his way. The only testimony of imaginable deployment of similarly simple tactic known in Oriental sources comes from the *Šāhnāmeḥ* when Iskandar builds mechanical bronze warriors powered with fire (steam?) and sets them against the enemy who is therefore defeated<sup>46</sup>. At the same time all combats described by Firdawsī involve lots of maneuvering, changing distances, changing weapons, hitting towards different directions. Also, the *Xusraw ud Rēdag* describes mounted combat as an art full of finesse where skill, agility and speed counted as much as strength<sup>47</sup>. The duel between Areobindus and a Persian warrior described by John Malalas<sup>48</sup> also show that the mounted combat of the era involved rapid maneuvers and deployed changing angles of attack rather than relying on greater power only. Ammianus Marcellinus' description of the advantages of the Roman *clibanarius* over Germanic cavalryman does not mention power at all but ability to wield the weapon with both hands not being cumbered with the shield<sup>49</sup>.

Also, the works of art depicting mounted lancers of late antiquity do not support the idea of existence of the looping system employed during the charge. The shafts are normally held either single-handed or two-handed at the hips level either alongside or across horse's neck. The schemes of depicting the ways of lance wielding did not change for centuries in Islamic art and were repeatedly shown in Mediaeval and Modern art of Central Asia. It seems that when European armored cavalry was dominated by a single paradigm of generating maximum power out of single thrust, both Islamic Near East, Eurasian steppes and China valued varied lance combat. The comparison of the description of the *Munyatu'l-ghuzāt* with the reliefs of Fīrūzābād<sup>50</sup> and Naqš-e Rostam<sup>51</sup> allows to assume that very similar techniques were involved resulting in falling of opponent horse and rider. The tactical and technical paradigm did not allow attaching of the lance to mount's trunk as this disabled valued fencing moves. The loops however might or even must have existed in reality however not as purely combat device but rather means of holding the lances during the march or using the bows. Both Byzantine and Mameluke military literature describe that the warriors were expected to perform fluent transition from lance wielding to archery. The sight of the *cataphracti* or *clibanarii* in marching order, with

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<sup>46</sup> *Šāhnāmeḥ*, 486.

<sup>47</sup> *Xusraw ud Rēdag*, 11-12 (149).

<sup>48</sup> Malalas XIV 23: "The two stepped forward, mounted and fully armed. According to Gothic custom, Areobindus also carried a lasso. The Persian attacked first with his lance; Areobindus turned to the right, threw his lasso at him, forced him off his horse and killed him".

<sup>49</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, XVI 12. 22: "For they realised that one of their warriors on horseback, no matter how skilful, in meeting one of our cavalry in coat-of-mail, must hold bridle and shield in one hand and brandish his spear with the other, and would thus be able to do no harm to a soldier hidden in iron armour; whereas the infantry soldier in the very hottest of the fight, when nothing is apt to be guarded against except what is straight before one, can creep about low and unseen, and by piercing a horse's side throw its unsuspecting rider headlong, whereupon he can be slain with little trouble".

<sup>50</sup> SKUPNIEWICZ 2006, 9-13; FARROKH, KARAMIAN, MAKSYMUK 2018: Fig. 5.

<sup>51</sup> SKUPNIEWICZ 2006, 9-13; FARROKH, KARAMIAN, MAKSYMUK 2018: Fig. 6-11.

their *contuses* affixed to the saddled, as it was adopted later by Islamic heavy cavalry, might have been the primary inspiration to imagine them charging in the same attire<sup>52</sup>.

Also the maneuver of light armed Blemmye infantry was a part of literary *topos* which involved description of “David” defeating “Goliath”. Naturally the very technique derives from Plutarchus’ description of the battle of Carrhae where light armed Gallic troops could duck under Parthian warriors’ horses bellies and rip them off<sup>53</sup>, however, as it was demonstrated by Suski<sup>54</sup>, confrontation of unarmored foot infantry with elite cavalry was part of late antique literature. The *topos* of an infantryman crawling on the ground to rip horse’s belly was sustained by Ammianus<sup>55</sup>.

The *topos* was strong enough to survive into Islamic literature of Abbasid period where it is described as confrontation of proud, heavy armored Xorāsānī cavalryman and humble peasant infantryman. In the latter example the reference to David and Goliath is emphasized by the fact that the Xorāsānī is killed by the slingshot<sup>56</sup>.

It should be also pointed out that if Heliodorus’ Persians attacked in close formation, The Blemmye would not have space or time to dive under their horses. Heliodorus seems to describe rather choreographed, circus acrobatic feat than an actual battle: “suddenly all together fell down and crept under the horses kneeling with one knee upon the ground and sheltering their heads and shoulders beneath”<sup>57</sup>. What at Plutarch’s record is an act of desperation of men condemned to defeat at Heliodorus’ becomes fancy group choreography followed by the show of Ethiopian sharpshooters’ skills. It is also worth to point that again Heliodorus attempts to blur the origin of his vision by changing the winning and losing sides, just as he did at the description of the siege of Syene, as Crassus’ heroic Gauls were all killed to the last one. It is not impossible that nimble light infantry might pose some threat to vulnerable horse’s bellies, unprotected by the barding, however reaching it, before being killed, was rather a feat of desperation as was evidenced at Carrhae, than elegant, orchestrated, nicely coordinated tactical device.

## Conclusions

The *Aethiopica* is a great piece of late antique literature, stern representant of its genre. Magnificent source to study literary traditions and *topoi* of fourth century Greek fiction but when applied to military history, its value drops rapidly and should be found as tertiary source at best. Naturally the literary constructions must have originated in some reality however the distance between the fiction and reality is difficult to assess and therefore the vivid description of Heliodorus cannot be found a reliable source to reconstruct Sasanian heavy cavalry.

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<sup>52</sup> NICOLLE 1994: 52.

<sup>53</sup> Plut., *Crass.* 25.

<sup>54</sup> SUSKI 2007: 123-132.

<sup>55</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, XVI 12. 22.

<sup>56</sup> KENNEDY 2001: 110-111.

<sup>57</sup> Heliod. IX, 275.

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## Summary

### Persian Riders in the Aethiopica of Heliodorus. A reliable source?

The description of the Persian Riders in Aethiopica of Heliodorus is often regarded a reliable source to reconstruct the tactics and armament of Iranian heavy cavalry of the Sasanian period, sometimes even spread to its Roman equivalents. The conventional nature of entire text is somehow disregarded in this particular point which is not less conventional than all other depictions of the novel. The description uses fixed phrases designed to flatter the erudite reader, not to describe actual combat troops of Achaemenid era disguised in fourth century attire. The Heliodorus' description must be treated with utmost carefulness and can be a tertiary source for reconstruction of the Sasanian heavy horse, at best.

**Keywords:** The Aethiopika, Heliodorus, Iran, heavy cavalry, *cataphracti*