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Useful by Nature, Defensive on Demand: Topography and Sieges of Rome in the Gothic War

By Peter Guevara
The wars of Justinian during the 6th century AD were ambitious military endeavors that were meant to restore the glory of the Roman Empire. To achieve the goal of restoring the former Roman west to Roman (Byzantine) control, Justinian began with an offensive against the North African Vandals in 533, sent Belisarius to lead the army, and achieved victory by 534 AD.\(^1\) Shortly thereafter, Justinian sent Belisarius to reconquer the Italian Peninsula. He conquered Sicily within a year and proceeded to invade the Italian mainland. He and his forces fought their way to Rome, entering through the Porta Asinaria just as the Gothic garrison was departing through the Porta Flaminia. Rome, however, presented a quandary to Belisarius. Rome, which was once the nexus of the Roman world, was a shadow of its former self: The population had shrunk and locals were not entirely sympathetic to Belisarius or his cause, but Belisarius had to both protect them and defend the city.\(^2\)

The scholars who have studied the siege of Rome in 537 – 538 AD and the AD 540’s treat different aspects of the siege but have not assessed other topographical elements. Christopher Lillington-Martin addresses Procopius’ depiction of the Goths’ crossing of a river with regard to the topographical and landscape implications for the siege of Rome.\(^3\) Averil Cameron examines the siege of Rome within the context of the logistical struggle that the “reconquest” of Justinian often faced.\(^4\) A.D. Lee discusses the weapons used by Belisarius during the siege of Rome, the broader picture of warfare in the time of Justinian, and the impact of wars on the affected communities.\(^5\) Lastly, J.B. Bury provides a narrative of the sieges of Rome but

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4 Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, 113.
does not investigate everything that happens inside or outside the city.\textsuperscript{6} Thus, there is a dearth in the assessment of the city elements that made it defendable.

This paper will investigate how Belisarius and the Byzantines defended the city by repurposing the topographical elements of the city and its surrounding areas to keep the Gothic forces, led by the Gothic king Wittigis in 536 – 537 and later his successor Totila in 546 – 547 and 549 from taking the city. The defense of Rome included not only safeguarding the walls of the city but also keeping the non-combatants inside safe and well-treated. An analysis of Belisarius’ defense will require analysis of Procopius’ literary account of the siege of Rome since he was present in Rome for the siege. Other evidence will be archaeological, cartographical and topographical for the purposes of demonstrating what parts of Rome were used for the defense of the city. Thus it will be argued that the city by its topographic nature, natural and artificial, defended itself but Belisarius used that nature to better defend the city. The paper will address how Belisarius utilized the Tiber River, the outside surroundings of Rome, the Aurelian Walls, and the existing structures to defend the city and how Totila worked against those defenses.

\textbf{The Surroundings of Rome}

Defending Rome in 536 AD also involved indirect defense of the city by controlling points in the vicinity of Rome. These especially included points north of the city. Belisarius’ wanted to maintain control of these cities north of Rome because they were near roads important to Rome. The Via Flaminia and Via Salaria were two of those important road networks and both roads led straight to Rome. Main strategic differences between the two are that the route through the Via Flaminia would have placed the Gothic Army at the Milvian Bridge which crosses the Tiber whereas the Via Salaria places the Goths at an unknown bridge which Lillington-Martin

\textsuperscript{6} Bury, \textit{A History of the Later Roman Empire}, 381 – 398.
claims is the Salarian Bridge. This development was critical because the defenders under the command of Belisarius would not be able to withstand a full assault on the walls of Rome.

Given that the forces defending the city were outnumbered 3 to 1 by the besieging army, open battle was not exactly a viable option; selected, pitched battles were. Procopius describes an episode in the early stages of the siege when Belisarius rode out of the city to reconnoiter a bridge that he had fortified with towers and a garrison near the Via Salaria. To his chagrin, he surprisingly encountered enemy forces recently arrived from Ravenna. It was in this engagement in February 537 that Belisarius first learned of the major advantage he held over the Goths: He had mounted archers at his disposal whereas the Goths only had mounted spearmen, infantry, and archers that only fought with the cover of the cavalry. E.A. Thompson finds it surprising that Belisarius only learned about his opponents’ military sources in that encounter. Belisarius was able to utilize his newfound knowledge immediately. He ordered 200 mounted archers to seize a hill not too far from the Salarian Gate and to fight the enemy with only their bows; they were to return to the city as soon as they had depleted their ammunition. They executed this order and caused great destruction for the enemy. This engagement outside the Salarian Gate revealed two things: First, the Romans possessed a weapons advantage that the natural surroundings augmented. Second, Procopius reveals that Belisarius retained control over the gates and thus over the city.

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7 Christopher Lillington-Martin, “Procopius on the Struggle for Dara and Rome,” *War and Warfare in Late Antiquity*, 621.
8 Procopius *Wars* 5.27.
9 E.A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Fall of the Western Roman Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 79.
10 Procopius *Wars* 5.27.4-14. Procopius writes: “τρεῖς τε, καθάπερ μοι ἔρρηθη, ἑπακόρομας ποιησάμενος τῶν ἐναντίων ἀμφὶ τετρακισχιλίους διέφθειρεν.”
The importance of defending from within rather from without is best shown in the sorties made by the defenders at various points during the siege. When Belisarius engaged the enemy outside the walls, it was often because the people of Rome beckoned him to do so. In doing so, he pitted his smaller but more mobile force against a larger force. Such was the case in Spring 537 AD when he led a bulk of his forces out of the city against the whole host of Wittigis’ army:

There was initial success but eventually the Romans were forced to retreat towards the walls.\textsuperscript{11} Afterwards, Belisarius and his forces resorted only to chosen battles with cavalry and unexpected sorties.\textsuperscript{12}

On another occasion in the spring of 537 AD, Belisarius sent a force led by Martinus and Valerianus to engage the Goths on the Plain of Nero just north of the Mausoleum of Hadrian. Procopius’ account is the only known literary source that refers to this region of Rome.\textsuperscript{13} Procopius remarks, however, that the Goths held an advantage over the Romans in this region.\textsuperscript{14} The area once hosted gladiatorial combat and there were narrow passages all around it too.\textsuperscript{15} Combining that aspect of the area and the larger numbers of the enemy, it becomes clear why the Romans were at a disadvantage when fighting outside the city walls.

**Natural Defense and Resource**

The Tiber River itself was a topographical feature that aided in the defense of the city and one which Belisarius utilized. One feature was that it formed a natural boundary between Rome and the some of the areas occupied by the besiegers; in that regard, it would also separate parts of Rome, but Belisarius and his men still retained control over the bridges of Rome. The

\textsuperscript{11} Procopius *Wars* 5.28-29.
\textsuperscript{12} Procopius *Wars* 6.1.1.
\textsuperscript{14} Procopius *Wars* 6.2.19.
\textsuperscript{15} Procopius *Wars* 6.1.5.
river also bounded a section of the Aurelian Wall closest to the Mausoleum. One of the major drawbacks, however, was that the Romans no longer had access to potable water because the Gothic forces had severed the aqueducts. The city’s residents were forced to draw water from wells and the river but clean water could not be provided to the city through the river because it was where all the waste of the city drained.  

A secondary feature of the Tiber River was its ability to provide power to makeshift corn mills. Since the aqueducts no longer provided water to the city, the people could not produce bread as they usually did. Bury writes that this particular event showed the “inventive genius of Belisarius.” To circumvent this problem in the early stages of the siege, Belisarius set up floating mills on the Tiber River which were powered by the flow of the river under the Aurelian Bridge. This enabled the making of bread in the city and allowed for the sustaining of the city. Belisarius also set up protection for the floating mills so that they would be safe from the debris and bodies that would disrupt the mills and so that the city would be safe from invasion via the river.

**The Ports of Rome**

Both the Byzantine and Gothic forces recognized the importance of maintaining access to the sea. Belisarius worked to maintain provisions for the city, which was 126 stades away from Portus. Food meant for Rome came via ship and then overland on the Via Portuensis. This was critical for the survival of Rome’s inhabitants and defenders because the siege was stretching their resources thin. Belisarius and the Byzantine army had sufficient recourse to supply via Portus during the first several months of the siege. Procopius notes that this enabled the

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16 Procopius *Wars* 5.19.27  
18 This bridge is now the Ponte Sisto, named after Pope Sextus V.  
20 Procopius *Wars* 5.26.4; this comes out to be about 14 miles.
defenders to essentially supply themselves at will but this captured the attention of the Gothic king: “[Vittigis], seeing that the enemy were enjoying a large degree of freedom, not only in taking out of the city whatever they wished, but also in bringing in provisions both by land and sea, decided to seize the harbour, which the Romans call “Portus.” The seizure of Portus created a logistical quandary for the Byzantine army. With Portus no longer available, Belisarius had to rely on the old port of Ostia and the road that led from it to Rome. Furthermore, the supply line of the Byzantine army was forced to come out as far as Antium (modern-day Anzio). Belisarius did not wish to send a garrison to Portus because he was concerned for the wall circuit and thus left

**The Walls of Rome**

The Aurelian Walls, built in the latter half of the 3rd century AD, were Belisarius’ primary line of defense. According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, a source from the late 6th century AD, Belisarius repaired the walls of the city in preparation for the siege of Wittigis.\(^2^1\) Coates-Stephens describes succinctly what Belisarius did to defend the city: “On his arrival in the city in December 536, Belisarius overhauled the defences in preparation for the siege: he dug a ditch around the circuit, fitted anti-siege machinery, and rebuilt the merlons.”\(^2^2\) Procopius writes that he blocked up the Flaminian Gate, shutting off that part of the circuit for entry and exit. He did this while keeping open gates at other parts of the wall circuit, thus showing his control over who came in and went out of the city.\(^2^3\)

The expanse of the Aurelian Walls aided Belisarius in his defense of Rome. The circuit of the Aurelian Walls was 12 to 13 miles in circumference, thus making Rome a very large city to

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\(^2^1\) *Liber Pontificalis* 60.4.
attack or defend. On the one hand the defenders had to defend an area is a great distance to cover for both the besiegers and the besieged.\textsuperscript{24} Since the defenders under Belisarius were outnumbered by the forces of Wittigis, this put Belisarius and his men at an even greater disadvantage. Cameron makes note of this lack of numbers, which is a common thread throughout the wars of Justinian.\textsuperscript{25} Procopius writes that the Goths, coming from the north, set up six camps on the left bank of the Tiber so that they might threaten at least five gates of the city. Lillington-Martin identifies these as being in a specific area “east of the Tiber, south of the Anio and north and east of the Aurelian Walls.”\textsuperscript{26} The Goths also set up a camp in the Plain of Nero on the right bank of the Tiber so that they might also assault the northwest side of the city.\textsuperscript{27} This particular arrangement allowed Belisarius to focus on the northern gates of the city, giving him and his army a chance to fight more effectively.\textsuperscript{28}

Procopius writes about an interesting section of the Aurelian Wall which does not feature heavily in the broader narrative of the Gothic Wars. This happens to be the “Περίβολον Διεππότα,” or “Broken Wall.” Procopius describes this wall section and its history in the \textit{Wars}:

And between this gate and the small gate next on the right, which is called the Pincian, a certain portion of the wall had split open of its own accord in ancient times, not clear to the ground, however, but about half way down, but still it had not fallen or been otherwise destroyed, though it leaned so to either side that one part

\begin{footnotes}
\item [24] Procopius \textit{Wars} 5.19.1.
\item [25] Cameron, \textit{The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity}, 113.
\item [27] Procopius \textit{Wars} 5.19.3.
\item [28] See Procopius \textit{Wars} 5.23.13-23 for an account of the battle at the Vivarium, a place near the Praenestine Gate that might be called a zoo (of sorts).
\end{footnotes}
of it appeared outside the rest of the wall and the other inside. And from this circumstance the Romans from ancient times have the place “Broken Wall” in their own tongue.²⁹

Procopius further wrote that “Belisarius in the beginning undertook to tear down this portion and rebuild it, the Romans prevented him, declaring that the Apostle Peter had promised them that he would care for the guarding of the wall there.”³⁰ This particular section, being a major cause of concern for the defenders, was not breached at any point in the siege. Procopius wrote that it never did cross either the Romans’ nor the Goths’ minds to pay attention to this break in the wall. Procopius also remarked that this section of the circuit remained as such at the time of his writing.³¹ That is to say that the “Broken Wall” endured three sieges of Rome but was only worthy of one reference during the first siege levied on Rome during the Gothic Wars.

**Re-purposed Edifications**

One interesting case of re-purposing during the course of the siege was the use of the Mausoleum of Hadrian to defend against the Gothic invaders. Procopius notes that this particular section was not heavily garrisoned because of the river. A key aspect of Hadrian’s Mausoleum is that it was an artificial hill and fortress; in its monumentality, this resting place of Roman emperors became a high ground for the defenders of the city. Procopius also comments that the tomb seemed to be a fortress so it was further enclosed by the defenders with walls extending from the Aurelian circuit. This spot was of particular importance to the defenders because it was situated adjacent to the Tiber River, which the Goths were not able to control, and a gate into the city was situated nearby. The Aurelian Wall also ran along the side of the river across from the Mausoleum, which is a reason why Belisarius placed a small garrison there under the command

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²⁹ Procopius *Wars* 5.23.3-4  
³⁰ Procopius *Wars* 5.23.5  
³¹ Procopius *Wars* 5.23.7-8
of Constantinus. Procopius writes that the defenders used the statues that adorned the edges of the base as projectiles to hurl at the Gothic forces. That being said, the only major action that Belisarius did with regard to the Mausoleum of Hadrian is appoint Constantinus as its garrison commander since the Mausoleum (being a fortress) and the river gave the enemy no room to maneuver against the Aurelian Wall.

When the Goths severed the aqueducts prior to the beginning of the siege, they created a defensive nightmare for Belisarius. Belisarius blocked up these newly formed routes into the city, lest the Goths engage in the same thing that he had done when he captured Naples in 536 AD. A few members of the Gothic forces traversed a small section of the broken aqueduct line under the Pincian Hill in an effort to infiltrate the city during a truce period. One of Belisarius’ men had reputedly seen a flicker of light from a section where a shaft connected the tunnel to the surface, but other guards dismissed it as light reflected in the eyes of a wolf. Belisarius, being wary, kept the spot under close attention. This happens to be the only instance in which the aqueducts are threatened during the siege, but it reflects Belisarius’ involvement with the surroundings of Rome.

**End of the First Siege of Rome**

The siege did not end with the destruction of the Gothic army but rather with the opening of another front when John besieged Rimini. Wittigis lifted his siege of Rome in order to relieve Rimini and protect his capital city Ravenna. Belisarius sent his forces after the departing Goths, taking down many of them as they fled. A bridge along the Via Salaria played a part in

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33 Procopius *Wars* 5.22.22.
35 See Procopius *Wars* 6.6.4-36 for the specifics of the truce; Procopius *Wars* 6.9.2-3.
the flight of the Goths, which was also a significant part of their route coming down to Rome at the outset of the siege according to Lillington-Martin.\textsuperscript{37} The topography lent itself to the defense of Rome, but it had to be harnessed in order to effectively fend off the Goths. Rome’s natural and the manmade features contributed just as much to the defense of the city as the soldiers defending it. Belisarius took an active role in the conduct of the siege as one might expect out of a good general.\textsuperscript{38} The Aurelian Walls and its gates were utilized by Belisarius because they allowed him to control who could come into the city or not, as well as whether or not it was necessary for the defenders to make sorties against the besiegers. Some of the areas outside the city walls were viable for pitching battles, but the open field did not always favor the forces of Belisarius. The natural border and resource of the river was invaluable to the survival of the defenders. When combined with Belisarius’ handiwork at the Aurelian Bridge, the Aurelian Walls on the edge of the river, and the Mausoleum of Hadrian, the river itself was well-protected. Belisarius indeed achieved a successful first defense of Rome.

**Unlocking Ravenna: Build-up to the Siege of Ravenna**

Geographic and topographic control also factored into the conduct of a siege. John, another general in the Byzantine army, was responsible for seizing and besieging two cities in the region of Picenum according to Procopius: Auximus and Urbinus. The account of Procopius shows that he assessed the situation at both cities. He, however, elected not to follow those orders on account of its strength. He instead marched on the city of Rimini, thus directly disobeying the orders of Belisarius. Procopius attributes this dereliction of duty not to a misguided sense of glory seeking or to forgetfulness, but to John’s rationale that an attack levied

\textsuperscript{37} Lillington-Martin, *Procopius on the Struggle for Dara and Rome*, 626.

\textsuperscript{38} G.T. Dennis, trans, *Maurice’s Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 108 – 109; this is a work composed well after the reign of Justinian but Belisarius executes some of the instructions from the section on siege warfare.
on a location near Ravenna—Rimini—would cause the Gothic forces to lift their siege of Rome. He summarily marched into Rimini without resistance from the Goths and held the city.

With Goths driven from the walls of Rome, Belisarius diverted his attention to aiding John in the struggle for Rimini. Belisarius ordered two of his men, Martinus and Ildiger, to travel up the peninsula to Rimini with their men. Procopius wrote that they had beaten the Goths to their final destination on account of the actions undertaken by Belisarius earlier in the war; the Gothic forces traveling north along the Via Flaminia tried to avoid the fortresses at Narnia, Spolitium, and Perusia and subsequently went by longer routes to Rimini. These are the same fortresses which Bessas and Constantinus sieged and garrisoned prior to the first siege of Rome. This episode of the Wars illustrates that the fortresses were elements of the terrain for which the Goths had circumvent. The fortresses are not part of the natural landscape but by means of Byzantine occupation they are co-opted into the topography of Italy.

On their way to Rimini, Martinus and Ildiger encountered a Gothic force stationed at a fortress in Petra, which Procopius called an “incident of the expedition.” This fortress, however, was more natural in its constitution than other topographical elements discussed thus far. The account rendered by Procopius states that there was road—a man-made road built by the Roman Emperor Vespasian in 76 A.D. —but the surrounding region was mountainous. Procopius relates the difficulty of navigating the area:

On the right of this road a river descends which no man can ford because of the swiftness of the current, and on the left not far away rises a sheer rock which reaches to such a height that men who might chance to be standing on its summit, as seen by those below, resemble in size the smallest birds. And in olden times

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39 Procopius Wars 6.10.7
40 Procopius Wars 6.11.8-9
41 Procopius Wars 6.10.10
there was no passage through as one went forward. For the end of the rock reaches to the very stream of the river, affording no room for those who travel that way to pass by. So the men of ancient times constructed a tunnel at that point, and made there a gate for the place. \(^{42}\)

The assault that Martinus and Ildiger levied against Petra is a solid example of utilizing natural topographical elements. Their forces fired missiles against one the gates but it had little effect because it was mostly closed up by the Gothic defenders. They proceeded thereafter to make their way up the mountainside and threw stones from the high ground that they attained. This, however, did not entirely bother the Goths and they retreated into their homes which rendered the Byzantine forces unable to harm their opponents. The Byzantine forces remedied this by breaking off “large pieces from the cliff and, many of them pushing together, hurled them down at the houses.” \(^{43}\) The intent of this particular effort was not simply to damage the houses or the inhabitants. These falling rocks instead aroused fear in the defenders: “And wherever these [rocks] in their fall did no more than just graze the building, they yet gave the whole fortress a considerable shock and reduced the barbarians to great fear.” \(^{44}\) The Gothic garrison surrendered shortly after this barrage and was mostly removed. Martinus and Ildiger posted a small garrison of Byzantine troops at Petra and joined John at Rimini, arriving before the Gothic host led by Wittigis.

The siege of Rimini marked the beginning of the struggle for Ravenna. Three cities blocked the path to Ravenna: Rimini, Urbinus, and Auximus. Rimini, being situated on the Adriatic coast, offered the Byzantines a port that would shorten the trip for reinforcements traveling from Constantinople if they held it. John’s speech in Procopius’ narrative conveys the

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\(^{42}\) Procopius *Wars* 6.11.11-14  
\(^{43}\) Procopius *Wars* 6.11.17  
\(^{44}\) Procopius *Wars* 6.11.18
topographical challenges that lay before him because the Romans were hemmed in by sea and land.\footnote{Procopius \textit{Wars} 6.12.17} Urbinus (modern-day Urbino) was another city that the Ostrogoths controlled and blocked the way. Auximus (modern-day Osimo), however, was the last city under Ostrogothic control to fall prior to the assault on Ravenna. This particular city was styled as the key to Ravenna by Procopius through the mouth of the Ostrogoth garrison commander: “And the writing was as follows: ‘When you appointed us, O King, for the garrison of Auximus, you said that you had placed in our keeping the keys of Ravenna itself and your kingdom.’”\footnote{Procopius \textit{Wars} 6.24.7} What this suggests is that the city both a literal and metaphorical defense for Ravenna: Take the city and Ravenna would fall shortly afterwards.

\textbf{Second Siege of Rome}

During the siege of Rome from 546 to 547 AD, Belisarius made his last contribution to the Gothic Wars in defense of the city. Procopius provides the details of Belisarius’ labors:

Gathering stones which lay close by, he threw them one on top of the other, regardless of order, without putting anything at all between the stones, since he had neither lime nor anything else of the sort, but caring only that the face of the masonry should be preserved, and he set a great quantity of stakes on the outside. Now he had previously, as it happened, dug deep trenches around the entire circuit-wall, as stated in the previous narrative.\footnote{Procopius \textit{Wars} 7.24.4-5}
Coates-Stephens refers to a number of surviving towers and sections of the Aurelian Wall which may possibly contain the re-used bricks which Belisarius and his troops were able to utilize after Totila, leader of the Goths in 546 AD, destroyed about a third of the Aurelian Wall’s circuit.48

The Byzantines also made an effort to control other areas around the region, including the area of Portus. This area, however, was not fully secure during the second siege of Rome. Procopius reports that the force of Belisarius heading towards Rome was ambushed by Gothic troops waiting for them.

The Final Siege of Rome

The Mausoleum of Hadrian featured prominently in the final siege that Totila levied against Rome. With the city on the verge of capture, several of the defenders took up residence in the tomb of the emperor Hadrian. At this point, Totila had already pierced the greatest strength of the defenders, the Aurelian Walls. He achieved that by means of subterfuge, convincing several Isaurian guards in the service of the Byzantines to let in the Goths through the Porta Asinaria. But this last effort offers interesting ideas. First, the Mausoleum of Hadrian is, at this point, certainly no longer a place respected as a burial ground of former Roman emperors. Second, even 10 years after the first defense of Rome during the Gothic Wars, the Mausoleum of Hadrian remained a defensive position in the city.49

Conclusion

There were some preconceived notions about the security of Rome prior to the siege of 536-537. Procopius writes that the city itself was too large to be defended. The people of Rome argued that it was logistically untenable, the terrain poor for defense, and the city walls too far around to cover effectively. Yet this speaks to the character of Belisarius and the Byzantine

49 Procopius Wars 7.36.17-28.
defenders portrayed by Procopius. The odds were clearly against the Byzantine forces in Rome, but nevertheless there was an effort to hold the city. The defense of Rome was successful in 537 – 538 but failed in the subsequent sieges. The use of existing topographical elements obviated the need for constructing new fortifications and Belisarius recognized that. Totila, conversely, understood the capacity to which the walls and topography permitted a defense of Rome and so worked to take apart the walls. The effort of the Byzantine defenders can still be appreciated today because the Aurelian Walls have survived for almost seventeen centuries and remain a symbol of their endurance and fortitude.
Bibliography


