

= Priscus (general) =

Priscus or Priskos (Greek : ??????? ; died 613) was a leading East Roman (Byzantine) general during the reigns of the Byzantine emperors Maurice (reigned 582 ? 602) , Phocas (r . 602 ? 610) and Heraclius (r . 610 ? 641) . Priscus comes across as an effective and capable military leader , although the contemporary sources are markedly biased in his favour . Under Maurice , he distinguished himself in the campaigns against the Avars and their Slavic allies in the Balkans . Absent from the capital at the time of Maurice 's overthrow and murder by Phocas , he was one of the few of Maurice 's senior aides who were able to survive unharmed into the new regime , remaining in high office and even marrying the new emperor 's daughter . Priscus , however , also negotiated with and assisted Heraclius in the overthrow of Phocas , and was entrusted with command against the Persians in 611 ? 612 . After the failure of this campaign , he was dismissed and tonsured . He died shortly after .

= = Biography = =

= = Under Maurice = =

Priscus first appears in the historical sources when he was appointed , in late 587 or early 588 , to command in the East against the Persians as *magister militum per Orientem* , replacing Philippicus . He only reached the East in spring , and assumed his new command at Monocarton in April . Priscus immediately ran into trouble with the soldiers : his haughty manner in refusing to mingle with them made him unpopular , and when a decree by Emperor Maurice which reduced army pay by a quarter was announced , the soldiers mutinied on Easter day , 18 April 588 . Priscus not only failed to restore order , but was himself attacked and forced to flee to Constantina , while the soldiers elected the *dux* of Phoenice , Germanus , as their leader . Priscus 's attempts from Constantina to calm the soldiers by employing the local bishops as mediators and rescinding the decree also failed . Philippicus was restored to command by Maurice , while Priscus returned to Constantinople .

Despite this debacle , in the same summer he was entrusted with the post of *magister militum* for Thrace , and tasked with campaigning against the Avars at the head of an improvised force . His deputy (*hypostrategos*) Salvianus with 1 @,@ 000 cavalry was sent to hold the passes of the Haemus Mountains , but after two days was forced by the Avars ' numerical superiority to withdraw . The Avars sacked the city of Anchialos , but an attempted siege of Drizipera was broken off and the Avars marched south , reaching Heraclea Perinthus and cutting Priscus 's forces off from Constantinople . Outflanked , Priscus retreated to Tzurullum , where he was besieged by the Avars . The 7th @-@ century historian Theophylact Simocatta reports that after a few days , Priscus devised a stratagem to force the Avars to withdraw : he allowed one of his guards to be captured , bearing a fake letter purportedly coming from Maurice that informed Priscus of a seaborne attack against the Avars ' homeland . The Avar khagan was persuaded that the letter was true and prepared to return home in haste ; he arranged for a truce in exchange for the renewed payment of an annual tribute . The 12th @-@ century history of Michael the Syrian gives this as 800 pounds of gold (some 60 @,@ 000 *solidi*) , a considerably reduced sum compared to the 100 @,@ 000 *solidi* agreed in 584 . The Avars departed for their country , while Priscus disbanded his army and returned to Constantinople . Priscus disappears for the next few years , as he fell into disfavour with Maurice . By 593 , he had recovered his position , as a letter by Pope Gregory the Great which congratulates him on returning to the emperor 's favour testifies . The Pope 's letter also testifies that by this time , Priscus had been given the Empire 's supreme honorary rank , that of *patrikios* .

In spring 593 , Priscus was re @-@ appointed in command as commander of the cavalry in Thrace , with Gentzon leading the infantry . Priscus , as the more senior of the two , also held overall command . Both generals marched to Dorostolon on the Danube , and campaigned with success against the Slavic tribes preparing to cross the river under their leaders Ardagastus and Musocius . Crossing the river , both Slavic hosts were annihilated in surprise night attacks . At the same time ,

however , Priscus reportedly quarrelled with his men over the distribution of the booty captured , and especially the considerable portion Priscus allocated to the imperial family . The soldiers were eventually placated , and the booty sent back to the capital with an escort . Maurice also sent orders for the army to winter north of the river , but this caused great resentment and unrest amongst the soldiers . Priscus chose to disobey the emperor 's order and crossed again with his army to winter in the southern bank . In the autumn of 593 , he was replaced by Maurice with his own brother Peter . Before the latter could assume command , however , Priscus arranged for a truce with the khagan , to whom he returned all Avar captives , some 5 @,@ 000 in number , a fact for which he was criticized by Maurice .

In late 594 , however , after Peter was heavily defeated by the Slavs , Priscus was again appointed to command as magister militum of Thrace , a post he proceeded to hold continuously for several years . In 595 , he marched up the Danube , crossing the river and marching along its northern bank to Novae , despite the khagan 's protests . There , he learned that Singidunum had been captured by the Avars . He sailed his army to the city and , after failed face @-@ to @-@ face negotiations with the khagan , sent the taxiarches Goduin to recapture it . The Avars , having razed the city 's walls , abandoned it at the approach of the Byzantine force . Next the Avars launched a raid against Dalmatia . Goduin was dispatched with 2 @,@ 000 men to shadow them . He managed to ambush the Avar detachment carrying their booty , recovered it and sent it to Priscus . After these events , the khagan turned west to campaign against the Bavarians and the Franks , leaving the Byzantine territories quiet for a period of a year and a half , until the summer of 597 . Nevertheless , Priscus and his army remained on watch along the Danube border .

When the Avars resumed their operations with a large invasion in autumn 597 , they appear to have caught Priscus , who was probably operating with his army at the eastern Stara Planina , off guard . They advanced quickly , and even managed to bottle up and besiege Priscus and his men at the port of Tomi , until the approach of a freshly raised army under Comentiolus forced them to abandon the siege on Easter day , 30 March 588 . Priscus , however , remained strangely inactive , and Comentiolus 's inexperienced army was routed in battle . The Avars then advanced south into Thrace , forcing Maurice to garrison the Anastasian Wall to prevent an attack on Constantinople . The Avar army , however , was decimated by a plague , and a treaty was quickly concluded , whereby the Avars retreated beyond the Danube in exchange for an increased annual tribute of 120 @,@ 000 solidi . The Byzantines used the time to regroup their forces , and in the summer of 599 , two armies under Priscus and Comentiolus headed west along the Danube . At Viminacium , Comentiolus fell ill and Priscus assumed sole command of the campaign . His army crossed the river , and fought three successive battles over ten days . These battles were won by the Byzantines , who , according to the account of Theophylact Simocatta , killed 28 @,@ 000 barbarians in total , including some of the sons of the khagan . Priscus pursued the fleeing khagan and invaded the Avar homeland in Pannonia . There , a fourth battle was fought near the river Tisza , which was also won by the Byzantines . On the very next day , Priscus dispatched a reconnaissance force across the river , which attacked three Gepid settlements by surprise . According to Simocatta , 30 @,@ 000 were killed and many were taken captive . Nineteen days later , another great battle was fought by the Tisza , which ended in a decisive Byzantine victory : the Avars and especially their Slavic allies suffered greatly , and Priscus took 3 @,@ 000 Avars , 8 @,@ 000 Slavs , and 6 @,@ 200 other barbarians captive , who were sent south as slaves . Maurice , who had not yet realized the extent of his army 's victory , ordered their release as a gesture of goodwill to the khagan . Nevertheless , Priscus 's campaign was a remarkable act of aggressive defence . In the words of Michael Whitby , the main modern expert on Maurice 's reign , it was " without parallel in the sixth century " for the Danube frontier , and which essentially decided the war for Byzantium .

After this success , which secured the Balkans , Maurice intended to consolidate Roman control by bringing in Armenian settlers who would be given land in exchange for military service . To this end , Priscus was sent to Armenia to recruit men and their families . His mission there , however , was interrupted by a large @-@ scale military revolt that brought about the downfall of Maurice . In 602 , Maurice again ordered his troops on the Danube frontier to winter north of the river . Again , this provoked widespread discontent , and when Peter , who had replaced Priscus , refused to bow

down and rescind the order , an outright mutiny broke out . The army chose the officer Phocas as its new leader and marched down to Constantinople . Without any credible military forces of his own , Maurice had to flee , but was captured with his family and executed by Phocas , who now became emperor .

= = = Under Phocas = = =

Due to his absence from Constantinople at the time of Phocas 's takeover , and because he retained a large measure of support within the soldiery , Priscus was the only one of Maurice 's senior generals who was retained by the new regime , whereas Comentiolus and Peter were executed and Philippicus was banished to a monastery . A possible explanation for this comes from the later historian Paul the Deacon , who records , possibly based on early 7th @-@ century sources , that Phocas had once served as an equerry under Priscus . At any rate , Priscus was soon counted among the main supporters of the new regime . In the winter of 602 / 603 , he was made comes excubitorum , commander of the imperial bodyguard . In 606 or 607 , he also married Phocas 's daughter , Domentzia , becoming the effective heir @-@ apparent to the sonless ruler . In the games celebrated at the Hippodrome to honor the event , however , Phocas reacted violently when he saw portraits of Priscus and Domentzia carried alongside his by the citizens . From this moment on , the chroniclers report , Priscus turned against Phocas .

Phocas 's rule lacked legitimacy and quickly came to be resented by the populace and the elites of the Byzantine Empire . What prestige he had further eroded when the Persian shah Khosrau II (r . 590 ? 628) declared war , and when the Byzantine forces began to suffer their first defeats . According to a later tradition , Priscus sent a letter to the Exarch of Africa , Heraclius the Elder , urging him to revolt . This is probably a later invention , but if true , it would indicate the level of dissent even within Constantinople . Whatever the truth of the matter , in 608 Africa rose in revolt , and the Exarch 's son , Heraclius the Younger , was dispatched against Constantinople at the head of a fleet . Unopposed by Phocas 's forces , he landed at the suburb of Hebdomon on October 3 and marched to the capital , where pro @-@ Heraclian riots had broken out . At this juncture , Priscus pretended to be ill , and withdrew to his mansion at the Boraïdou quarter , where he assembled the excubitores and his own retainers (bucellarii) , thus depriving Phocas of his main source of armed support . He is also recorded by John of Nikiu to have safeguarded the women of Heraclius 's family from retribution by Phocas .

= = = Under Heraclius = = =

After Phocas 's fall , Heraclius became emperor of Byzantium . The Patriarch Nikephoros claims in his Short History that the crown was first offered to Priscus , who refused it . As commander of the excubitores , a protopatrikios (first among the patrician order) and one of the few senior and influential officials with ties to past regimes , Priscus represented a potential threat to Heraclius . Nevertheless , facing a critical situation in the East , where the Persians had overrun much territory and were raiding Anatolia , Heraclius appointed Priscus in command of the Anatolian army in the autumn of 611 . The Persian general Shahin captured Caesarea in Cappadocia , only to be blockaded and besieged there by Priscus . Heraclius himself decided to visit the army camp at Caesarea during winter , but Priscus refused to meet him , on the pretext of an illness . This snub alienated Heraclius from his general , and when Shahin and his army managed to break out and escape in summer , Priscus was recalled to Constantinople , ostensibly to become godfather to the Byzantine emperor 's son , Heraclius Constantine . At the capital , he was removed from his post as comes excubitorum , which went to Heraclius 's cousin Nicetas , while command in Anatolia went to the other surviving general of Maurice , Philippicus , brought out of retirement . Priscus was brought before the Byzantine Senate and accused by Heraclius of treason . In the end , he was tonsured as a monk on 5 December 612 and confined in the Monastery of the Chora , where he died in 613 .

= = Assessment = =

Priscus comes across as an able and versatile military leader . In many instances , his operations against the Slavs resemble the prescriptions of the most influential Byzantine military manual , the Strategikon , ascribed to Emperor Maurice . Despite his reputation as a strict disciplinarian and his aloof stance which led to the mutiny of 588 , in later campaigns he showed ability in dealing with the soldiers and calming their discontent . This cleverness was also employed against the Avar khagan . For instance , during the siege of Tomi in 598 , Priscus managed to persuade the Avars to supply the Byzantine army , which was in fact close to starvation , with grain . As the scholar Walter Kaegi comments , Priscus 's policy in defending the Danube frontier consisted in keeping the peace with the khagan " by sly negotiations " , allowing him focus his efforts against the Slavs raiding imperial territory .

The main Byzantine source for the period , Theophylact Simocatta , displays a marked bias in favour of Priscus , especially in its account of the Balkan campaigns , where the other generals are denigrated and made to appear incompetent , with their achievements regularly belittled while Priscus 's successes are extolled and his defeats glossed over . This may be due to the fact that for this period , Simocatta relied on a semi @-@ official " campaign log " compiled during the years of Emperor Phocas , when Priscus was pre @-@ eminent while most of his rivals were either executed or in exile .