

The Mediterranean Muslim Navy and the Expeditions Dispatched against Constantinople

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to present an account of the information we find in various Arabic sources of the early period of Arabic historiography on the preparation of a military naval force and the expeditions launched against Constantinople during the period of the early expansion of the Muslim Arabs. Arabic sources give various pieces of information on shipyards, ports as well the recruitment of local men both in Syria and Egypt in the preparation of a military fleet by the Arab Muslim leaders. The Byzantine naval military bases in Syria and Egypt were taken by the Arabs in the early 7th century, and local men who served the Byzantines before, then joined the Arabs. These Arab naval forces were not only engaged in a maritime conflict with the Byzantine fleet in the East Mediterranean but also took part both in the expeditions launched against Byzantine territories and especially in the early sieges of Constantinople, the ultimate aim of all preparations. For the Arabs, the significance of Constantinople was based not only on its political and cultural prestige but also on its material affluence. For this reason, four times it was the aim of Arab Muslim forces sent by Arab leaders in Damascus of Syria. Indeed, the Arab navy played an important role in the East Mediterranean conflict and the expeditions against Constantinople, which are celebrated both in Muslim history and legend, have found their way into the Muslim eschatological literature as well.*

Keywords: *Arab historians, Mediterranean sea, Muslim Navy, Constantinople, Arab Expeditions.*

1. Introduction

When one studies the history of the peoples who lived around the coasts of the Mediterranean in the period between A.D. 7th to 10th centuries, he is immediately struck by the religious divide between Christians on the one hand and Muslims on the other. This fact has its origins in the events of the seventh century, when the peoples around the coasts of Mediterranean Sea were overwhelmed by new political, social and cultural changes. The Mediterranean Sea was no longer the *mare nostrum*. The clash between Byzantium and the Arabs in the Central Mediterranean appears to us first of all as a continuous struggle for naval supremacy, in fact a struggle for the actual domination over the sea routes. It also seems natural to suppose that this division into what can easily be represented as two mutually hostile religious blocks must have had a "naval dimension". The frontiers between these two broad divisions might shift from time to time. One group or the other would be dominant at different periods but in essence conflict at sea would be the story of struggle to obtain and maintain this dominance.

2. The Caliphate's expansion by sea

The Arabs had first approached sea power with diffidence and considered it a purely subservient function of their conquests by land; but it speedily gained importance under the early Umayyads, whose Mediterranean vocation has been stressed by many historians and whose conscious purpose of supplanting Byzantium has been illustrated by Gibb (1958). This consciousness of belonging to the Mediterranean, and plans for expansion in it, were abandoned with the fall of the Umayyads in A.D. 750. The emergence of the Abbasids marked the final orientalization of the Caliphate. It had been the heir and the rival of Byzantium; now it became the continuator of Asiatic traditions - in the first place those of the Sassanids. The Abbasid state, even in its heyday, was entirely continental. It had no war fleet of any importance in Mediterranean. It liquidated Maghrib, or at least suffered it to become detached from the Empire. In brief, it turned its back on

the Mediterranean. Cyprus saw a shared condominium of power between the Abbasid Caliphate and Byzantium (Christides, 1984: 168-72; Jenkins, 1951-53; Kyrris, 1984). But the heritage of Mu'āwiya, Walīd, and Maslama passed into other hands, precisely through the disintegration of the great imperial structure after the Umayyad period. Admittedly with more limited means and aims, smaller but more organic formations took up the expansion by sea of the Islamic forces, which appeared increasingly indispensable to the continuation of conquest (Gabrieli, 1964).

3. Factors contributed to maritime activity in the Mediterranean

An understanding of the imperatives driving maritime activity in this area at these dates, however, depends on the discussion of several factors besides religious differences. First of all, the unchanging imperatives of the physical world, the configuration of the coastline, its capes, bays and islands, the currents and the winds need to be considered. Secondly, there are questions of politics or of the location of power, the aims and skills of rulers and their possible preoccupations elsewhere than in the Mediterranean. Thirdly, there are the imperatives of logistics and economics. Did any area have great advantages in ship types? Was seaborne trade the real issue underlying all others, with the urge to seize a commercial advantage, the root cause of much conflict at sea? (Rose, 1999: 561-62).

4. The Mediterranean Muslim Navy

Islam was to challenge Christendom at sea in the Mediterranean for a thousand years. In the early Middle Ages, *pace* the great naval assaults on Constantinople itself in 673-79 and 717-18, the most serious threat from Islam developed in the ninth and tenth centuries. During that period Muslims were able in some cases to capture and hold, and in other cases to compromise seriously Christian authority over all of the islands and some of the important mainland regions and bases along the trunk routes of the sea. The operations of the Muslim fleets took the form of corsair cruises by single ships or small flotillas, raids on coasts and islands for booty and slaves by *ghāzī* squadrons pursuing the *ghazw* of *jihād*, and full-scale invasions by large fleets. Their *ghazw* was a form of *jihād*, perhaps the pre-eminent form, designed and intended to advance the frontiers of the Muslim world, the *dār al-Islām*, into the world of war, the *dār al-ḥarb*. It does seem, however, that in composition and tactics Muslim flotillas were quite similar to those of their Byzantine opponents. Since much of their activity consisted of raiding, Muslim Mediterranean flotillas of warships included more fast, oared vessels and fewer sailing *naves* than was the case for their Byzantine naval rivals. But the overall organization of Muslim fleets very much resembled that of Byzantine fleets. Such operations posed extremely serious threats to Byzantine shipping (Pryor, 1988: 102).

There were, however, also several differences between these two naval establishments. During the Umayyad period, there is no evidence that Arab ships ever used Greek fire, which remained Constantinople's secret weapon. In addition, the Arabs suffered from a severe deficiency in wood necessary for naval construction, especially in the eastern Mediterranean (Lewis and Runyan, 1990: 41-61).

It was of this period that the Arab historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldūn (A.H. 732-84 /A.D. 1332-82) wrote later that: "... the Muslims gained control over the whole Mediterranean. Their power and domination over it was vast. The Christian nations could do nothing against the Muslim fleets, anywhere in the Mediterranean. All the time, the Muslims rode its waves for conquest." (Ibn Khaldūn, 1958: II. 41; Gabrieli, 1964). When Ibn Khaldūn referred to Muslim control of the seas in his period, what he really meant, whether he realized it or not, was that Muslim territorial gains along the trunk routes had given Muslim shipping a freedom to move virtually wherever it liked in the Mediterranean and had denied that same freedom to Christian shipping. Muslim sea power contributed greatly in this period towards making it a prosperous one for the commercial economies of various Muslim states and towards promoting Muslim maritime traffic throughout the Mediterranean (Pryor, 1988: 106 n. 13; Ahrweiler, 1975: 15).

The Muslims came closest to achieving their goals in the first two to three decades of the eighth century, after which their expansion slowed down. They did completely overrun the Persian Empire. The first three Arab civil wars, A.D. 656-61, 680-92, 747-51, drastically hampered the Muslims' offensive ability and their ability to pursue their strategic program. Their failure resulted more from their own internal dissensions than from the recuperative powers and military adaptations of their opponents in the seventh and early eighth centuries. The high water mark of military expansion against Byzantium was probably the first or second siege of Constantinople (A.D. 674-78, or 717-18), although others might argue for their zenith at the time of their operations north of the Pyrenees in the early eighth century. In any case, the first Muslim civil war seriously arrested the growing military momentum of the Muslims (Kaegi, 1992: 243).

5. Constantinople: Which was the Arabs' motive to conquer it?

From the earliest times, Constantinople had been the ultimate goal of the Muslim conquests, and its continuous presence in the Arabic Islamic texts throughout the medieval period reflects its symbolic importance as an ideal city representing the totality of the achievements of a grandiose Christian civilization. With the conquest of the Byzantine capital, one of the inveterate dreams and most cherished goals of Islamic ideology were to be realized. The focus of the early references to Constantinople was on its ultimate conquest. This concern was real since several Muslim armies besieged and seriously threatened the city in the first/seventh and second/eighth centuries. The tenacious resistance of the Byzantines relegated the conquest of the Byzantine capital to apocalypticism. In the eyes of both Byzantines and foreigners, Constantinople was an epitome of the eastern Roman Empire, representing the entire complexity of the empire's power structures, social practices, religious norms, and artistic canons (Simeonava, 2000). Constantinople had survived the successive attempts of Muslim armies to capture it.

When reading Arabic-Islamic medieval literature, it is impossible to avoid noticing the special mystique that Constantinople held for the Arab Muslims. The authors were practically unanimous in declaring that no other place in the world was comparable in size, in geographical location, and in importance (al-Muqaddasī, 1906: 147-48). The third/ninth and fourth/tenth century geographical manuals determined later perceptions of the Byzantine capital, since works from the period became points of reference for subsequent Arabic-Islamic writings on the city. In writing about Constantinople, Arab Muslims were not only reacting to the city's physical presence. They were also responding to its literary and historical associations. It is therefore crucial to recognize that the perception of space was shaped by subjective factors, for space is not only part of the material world but is part of the world of imagination, as well. The texts and the discourses contained within them convey the unmistakable ambiguity and complexity that underlay the Arab Muslim attraction to, and understanding of, the Byzantine capital. This intricate image did not go unnoticed by contemporaries. For instance, the fourth/tenth century geographer, al-Muqaddasī, observed that controversy and fabrications about Constantinople abounded among Muslims, especially with respect to its size, buildings, and conditions (al-Muqaddasī, 1906: 147-48).

Knowledge of the Byzantine Empire meant knowledge of its boundaries, countryside, and cities, as well as the routes and mountain passes leading to it, and especially to its capital. For Muslim geography, Constantinople is located at that place where the continent extends to Rome and the land of the Franks, to the east is the land of the Turks. It is surrounded by a canal to the east and north, on the southern and western sides, it touches the land (al-Mas'ūdī, 1967: 139; Ibn Khurradādhbih, 1889: 104-5).

For the Arabs, the significance of Constantinople lay as much in its political and cultural prestige as in its material affluence and magnificence. This was especially true in the early days of Muslim expansion and during the consolidation of the Muslim state. The ambition of the first-century caliphs seem to have been nothing less than the establishment of their power in Constantinople, for the city was the natural focus of their growing empire and thus the target of several military campaigns. But with the solidification of the structure of the Islamic empire, Umayyad policy began to disengage itself from Byzantine tradition. Furthermore, the

failure of repeated attempts to conquer Constantinople together with the transfer of the Muslim capital to Iraq – moving the empire's center away from the Byzantine frontier – had the effect of distancing the dream of the city's conquest, rather than strengthening Muslim resolve to make it reality by employing forces and efforts in a continuous and organized fashion.

6. A Further Study Objective

Apart from the naval struggle, this article aims at presenting the accounts found in various Arabic sources on expeditions launched against Constantinople during the period of the early expansion of the Muslim Arabs. The bulk of our scholarship linking Byzantines with Muslims focuses on their interactions as military and religious antagonists, or their diplomatic and commercial exchanges, or the occasional osmosis of cultural influences across frontiers that were, more often than not, barriers rather than bridges. Nonetheless, at the margins of this corpus, one finds a smattering of discussion and fragments of evidence pertinent to our theme, above all in the incomparable *oeuvre* of Marius Canard (1926).

6.1 Arabic sources

The Muslim authors give various pieces of information on the expeditions and sieges of Constantinople. Such Arabic accounts date back to the middle of the 7th century A.D. In this paper the expeditions against Constantinople as accounted by Arab historians such as al-Ṭabarī are categorized and described thoroughly (forces, arms, initial stages, duration, aids, effects, etc.).

6.2 Research Method

I discuss the causes, the preparation of the expeditions, the war operations as well as the various anecdotes and legends connected with them. Indeed, the expeditions against Constantinople are celebrated both in Muslim history and legend and have found their way into the Muslim eschatological literature. In this paper, there are analyzed extensively the various Muslim sieges of Constantinople as described through the narrations of the Arab authors. Their causes are discussed, their expeditions and operations are detailed, and various anecdotes connected to them are related. Indeed, these events are celebrated both in history and in legend and have even found their way into eschatological literature (El Cheikh, 2004: 62).

7. The Muslim expeditions against Constantinople as described in Arabic historiography of the early period

In all there were four distinct expeditions which reached Byzantium. The first three were sent under the Umayyads by Mu'āwiya and by Sulaymān. The first was in A.H. 34 / A.D. 655 under Mu'āwiya, the second in A.H. 48-49 / A.D. 668-69 under the leadership of the crown prince Yazīd, the third attack on Constantinople was made in the so-called seven years' war (A.H. 54-60 / A.D. 674-80) (Bury, 1899: II. 310 n. 4), which was waged mainly between the two fleets before Constantinople and the last great siege of Constantinople was conducted in A.H. 98-99 / A.D. August 716 – September 717) under Maslama. Of the four only two involved real sieges of the city: one by Yazīd (49/669) and the other by Maslama (98/716).

7.1 The first Muslim expedition against Constantinople (A.H. 34 / A.D. 655)

Twice did Mu'āwiya stretch out his mighty arm against Constantinople. The main object of these raids into *Bilād al-Rūm* (the territory of the Romans, Asia Minor) was of course the acquisition of booty, though the dim spectacle of Constantinople may have beckoned beyond in the distant background. As early as A.H. 34 (A.D.

655), while Mu'āwiya was still governor of Syria under 'Uthmān, his fleet under the leadership of Busr b. Abī Arīh (Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, 1964: 189-90; Ibn Ḥajar, 1907-9: I. 153) in co-operation with the Egyptian fleet under 'Abd Allāh b. Abī Sarḥ met the Greek navy led by Emperor Constans II (r. A.D. 641-68), son of Heraclius, in a naval battle, known as the Battle of Phoenix, off the coast of Lycia and scored the first great naval victory of Islam. This maritime engagement is referred to in Arabic chronicles as Dhāt al-Ṣawārī (i.e. "The Battle of Masts") either after the name of the place itself, which is said to have been rich in cypress trees from which masts (ṣawārī) could be fashioned, or because of the number of masts of the many ships engaged. The Arabs transformed the sea fight into a hand-to-hand encounter by tying each Arab ship to a Byzantine vessel (Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, 1964: 190). The battle proved a devastating defeat, a second Yarmūk; the Byzantine forces were completely destroyed (Theophanes, 1883-85: 245-46, 332). The Arabs, however, did not take advantage of the victory and push on to Constantinople, probably because of the murder of 'Uthmān, which occurred about this time, and other concomitant civil disturbances (Hitti, 2002: 200-1). The Byzantine defeat opened the eastern Mediterranean to further Muslim expansion. However, by A.D. 656, the Muslim offensive stalled as the ascension of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib to the caliphate split the Muslim community and led to a Muslim civil war that lasted until A.D. 661 (Canard, 1926: 63-7).

7.2 The second Muslim expedition against Constantinople (A.H. 48-49 / A.D. 668-669)

After the assassination of caliph 'Alī in 661, Mu'āwiya became caliph and launched a new offensive against the Byzantine Empire, seizing the city of Calcedon on the Bosphorus in 668. The following year, the Muslims crossed the Bosphorus to attack the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, but were repelled by the Byzantines at Amorium. The Muslims first appeared before Byzantium itself in 669 under the leadership of Mu'āwiya's son Yazīd, the future caliph Yazīd I. Many times was Constantinople the aim of attacks by Umayyad forces, the only occasions on which Syro-Arabs ever succeeded in reaching the high triple wall of the mighty capital were in the years A.D. 669, 674-680 and 716-717. The first was in A.H. 49 / A.D. 669 under the leadership of the crown prince Yazīd, whose warriors were the first ever to set eyes on the great Byzantine City. The expedition of Yazīd and Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī against Constantinople in the year A.H. 48-49 / A.D. 668-669 resonates in the Arabic sources. According to al-Ṭabarī, "The raid of Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya against the Byzantines occurred during this year. He reached Constantinople (Qusṭanṭīniyya) accompanied by Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn 'Umar, Ibn al-Zubayr, and Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī" (al-Ṭabarī, 1987: XVIII. 94). The siege laid by Yazīd and Faḍālah in the spring of 669 was raised in the summer of the same year. Byzantium had a new and energetic emperor, Constantine IV (A.D. 668-85). "In legend Yazīd distinguished himself for bravery and fortitude below the walls of Constantinople and earned the title *fatā' al-'Arab* (the young champion or hero of the Arabs)" (Hitti, 2002: 201).

7.3 The third Muslim expedition against Constantinople (A.H. 54-60 / A.D. 674-680)

During the seven years' war of A.D. 674-680 and in the reign of the Emperor Constantine IV, Constantinople was attacked from the sea by Yazīd again. In 674, the Muslims attempted to seize Constantinople by a prolonged siege but failed. At his time, the attack on Constantinople was waged mainly between the two fleets before Constantinople. The Arabs had secured a naval base in the Sea of Marmara on the peninsula of Cyzicus, mistaken for "the isle of Arwād" (Theophanes, 1883-85: 353-54; Conrad, 1992: 317-401; Hitti, 2002: 202-3) in the Arab chronicles. This served as winter headquarters for the invading army, whence hostilities were resumed every spring. The Arab accounts of these campaigns are badly confused in our sources. The use of Greek fire is supposed to have saved the city. The Greek accounts dilate on the disastrous effect of this fire on the enemy ships. In 677, the Byzantine navy decisively defeated the Muslim navy in the Sea of Marmara, which greatly contributed to a lifting of the siege the following year. As a result, the Muslim advance in Asia Minor and the Aegean was halted, and an agreement to a thirty-year truce was concluded

soon after. On the death of Mu‘āwiya (A.D. 680) the Arab fleet withdrew from the Bosphorus and the Aegean waters, but attacks against “the territory off the Romans” were by no means relinquished.

7.4 The fourth Muslim expedition against Constantinople (A.H. 97-99 / A.D. 715-717)

Over the next two decades both the Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire were occupied securing their domains and waging minor skirmishes against each other. Full-scale war began in A.D. 696-699, when a second Arab expedition to Africa led to the seizure of Carthage and Utica, ending the Byzantine presence in North Africa. Byzantine efforts to recover their possession proved unsuccessful, and this led to a further political instability in Constantinople, where three emperors were overthrown between A.D. 711 and 717. At the same time, in 711, the Muslims breached the Taurus barrier and advanced into Anatolia. Unable to stop the Arab advance, the Emperor Anastasius II (r. A.D. 713-715) began preparing the defenses of the capital. In 716, another Muslim assault on Constantinople failed, but in 717, an Arab force of 120,000 men and 1800 ships besieged the capital. The Bulgarians, hoping to take the city for themselves, attacked the Arabs, who were forced to build two sets of siege works, to contain the Byzantines on one side and to keep out the Bulgarians on the other.

The most famous expedition that was launched by the Umayyad Arab dynasty of Damascus against Byzantium was undertaken by Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik in A.H. 97-99 / A.D. 715-717 (Brooks, 1899), and numerous accounts of it have been preserved. After capturing Sardis and Pergamum, Maslama undertook his memorable siege of Constantinople oppressing its inhabitants (A.D. August 25, 716 – September 717). The sources are late and contradictory, and the oldest accounts are already more legend than history. In fact, the supreme Muslim effort was made in A.D. 716-717 by the caliph Sulaymān, who is described in the Arabic sources as a lover of *ghazw*, raiding, and who designated his half-brother Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik to be supreme commander of the attacking forces, which comprised the Syrian army by land and the Egyptian fleet by sea. We read of almost yearly summer incursions (*ṣā’ifāh*), though none assumed importance until the caliphate of Sulaymān (A.D. 715-717). Sulaymān considered himself the person referred to by the current *ḥadīth* that a caliph bearing a prophet’s name was to conquer Constantinople (Hitti, 2002: 202-3). When the new caliph ‘Umar II came to the throne in 717, he immediately gave orders for Maslama to abandon the siege of Constantinople. This was the last direct Muslim effort against Constantinople for over seven centuries.

In the years 715-716, “‘Umar b. Hubayrah al-Fazārī undertook a naval expedition against Byzantium, where he spent the winter” (al-Ṭabarī, 1989: XXIV. 30). “He was accompanied by the most illustrious commanders of the Syrian army: Khālid b. Ma’dān, ‘Abdallāh b. Abī Zakariyyā’ al-Khuzā’ī and Mujāhid b. Jabr” (al-Ṭabarī, 1989: XXIV. 40). According to Arabic sources, “Sulaymān sent his brother to Constantinople and ordered him to stay there until he either conquered the city or received Sulaymān’s order to return. So he spent the winter and the summer there” (al-Ṭabarī, 1989: XXIV. 39; al-Ya‘qūbī, 1964: III. 44; al-Kūfī, 1968-75: VII. 298-306; *FHA*, 1869-71: 25 ff.; Ibn Kathīr, 1929-32: IX. 174-5; al-Maqqisī, 1899-1918: vol VI, 43-4). The Muslim army which crossed the Dardanelles at Abydos was equipped with siege artillery, but the armada had to anchor near the walls of the city in the Sea of Marmara and in the Bosphorus, as passage into the Golden Horn was barred by a chain. This was another time the Byzantine capital had been besieged by a joint Arab fleet and army (Hitti, 2002: 212).

According to the account of al-Ṭabarī, in the year A.H. 97 (A.D. September, 715 – August 24, 716), “Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik equipped the armies and dispatched them to Constantinople”. Al-Ṭabarī continues saying that “when Sulaymān became caliph he raided the Byzantines, setting up camp in Dābiq, a village in the ‘Azāz district north of Aleppo, situated on the edge of a plain where the Umayyad armies prepared for their annual summer raids into Byzantine Anatolia, and sending Maslama ahead. The Byzantines feared him. When Sulaymān set up camp in Dābiq, he swore to God, according to al-Ṭabarī’s narration, that he would not leave until the army that he had sent against the Byzantines entered

Constantinople" (al-Ṭabarī, 1989: XXIV. 30, 40-1). This last siege of Constantinople was conducted (A.D. August 716 – September 717) under his reign by the stubborn Maslama, the caliph's brother (al-Ṭabarī, 1989: XXIV. 30), who, according to "al-Wāqidī, raided Byzantium and conquered the fortress that had previously been taken by al-Waḍḍāḥ, the leader of the separate military regiment of non-Arabs named after their commander, i.e. Waḍḍāḥiyya" (Crone, 1980: 38).

This remarkable siege, the most threatening of Arab attacks, was a combined land and sea effort by the Arabs to take the capital city of the Byzantine Empire. It is best known because of the many descriptions extant. The failure of the Muslim Arabs to capture Constantinople halted the Arab expansion. The besiegers were reinforced both by sea and by land and received aid from Egyptian ships. They were provided with naphtha and special siege artillery. In connection with this siege we have the first historical reference to the chain which barred the way of the attacking fleet into the Golden Horn. The famous Greek fire and the attacks of the Bulgars wrought havoc in the ranks of the invaders (Hitti, 2002: 201). In September, the Muslim fleet appeared but was driven off by the Byzantines using Greek fire. The Muslim army thus remained trapped in its siege works during an unusually harsh winter. A fleet of 600 ships was sent to replenish the Muslim forces. The ships landed near Chalcedon to avoid the Byzantine fleet. The crews of the Muslim fleet, mostly Egyptian Christians, defeated en masse the Byzantines. After a Muslim reinforcing column was destroyed near Nicaea and an epidemic had broken out among the Muslim forces near Constantinople, caliph 'Umar finally ordered a retreat in August 718. The Muslim retreat was not opposed, but surviving Muslim ships were attacked, and their fleet was further damaged by storms. In the siege of Constantinople in A.D. 717-718, Theophanes (*Anno Mundi* 6209) reports of the unreliability and desertion of Christian sailors from the Muslim fleet that was blockading and besieging Constantinople (Theophanes, 1883-85: 397).

One of the greatest betrayals occurred in 99/717, during Maslama's siege of Constantinople, when the patrician Leo broke his promise to the Muslim commander. Leo asked Maslama "to allow enough food to enter the city to feed the people", and "to give them permission to gather food one night". At this point, "Leo began to act in a hostile manner, having deceived Maslama by means of a trick that would shame even a woman. The Muslim army suffered what no army had suffered previously, to the extent that a soldier was afraid to leave camp by himself" (al-Ṭabarī, 1989: XXIV. 41). This tale appears widely in the Arabic-Islamic sources (cf. al-Maqqisī, 1899-1918: VI. 43-4).

The account in *Kitāb al-'uyūn* or *Book of Springs* (FHA, 1869-71: 24-33), which dates from the latter half of the fifth/eleventh century, is the most complete concerning the disastrous siege of Constantinople by the Arabs in 717-718 (al-Iṣṣfahānī, 1869: 23-33). Here, Maslama is said to have written a letter to the Byzantine emperor stating: "I will not leave this *jazīra* (peninsula) without entering your city". The emperor agreed to open the gates to Maslama alone and ordered that "horses and men be lined up from the gate of the city to the gate of the Great Church, banners be erected, and palaces be decorated with the best possible ornamentation". Maslama told the famous Syrian *ghāzī* (i.e. one who took part in raids against infidels), 'Abdallāh al-Baṭṭāl: "I enter this city knowing that it is the capital of Christianity and its glory. My only purpose in entering it is to uphold Islam and humiliate unbelief". Maslama paraded in the city and was greeted at the gate of the palace by Emperor Leo III (r. A.D. 717-741). It is said that the emperor stood up, kissed his hand, and walked alongside him to the church, while Maslama still on his horse (Ibn A'tham, 1968: VII. 300-1). A mosque in Constantinople is attached to Maslama's name, for Emperor Constantine VII (r. A.D. 913-59) mentions that the mosque of the Saracens was built at the request of Maslama in the Praetorium (Porphyrogenitus, 1967: chapter 21). The construction of a mosque in Constantinople was a subject of major concern among the Muslims. Thus, in spite of its failure, the siege of Constantinople in 99/717 had one positive outcome for the Arabs: namely, the establishment of the first mosque in the Byzantine capital.

As long as the Arabs were looking forward to the imminent fall of Constantinople this frontier marked only a temporary pause, but the failure of the 718 siege and the political upheavals which preoccupied the caliphate during much of the middle decades of the eighth century led to a gradual change in strategy and

outlook. On the Arab side the frontier zone began to coalesce into a fortified and settled borderland, known as the *thughūr* (Whittow, 1996: 212).

7.5 The expedition of Hārūn al-Rashīd against Constantinople (A.H. 158-169 / A.D. 775-785)

Between A.D. 718 and 741 a series of raids and counter raids ravaged Anatolia. In this period, Byzantine strategy embraced not only positional defense but also a policy of intercepting Muslim raids returning from plundering expeditions. In 783, the Abbasid army reached the Bosphorus, near which they defeated the Byzantines at Nicomedia (Izmit or Kocaeli), forcing Irene to sue for peace, accept a three-year truce, and pay tribute. In 786, the new Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. A.D. 786-809) began fortifying his borderland territories in preparation for an invasion of the Byzantine Empire. In 797, Abbasid forces advanced to the Byzantine cities of Ephesus and Ancyra (Ankara), forcing Empress Irene to reinstate the payment of previously agreed tributes. This was the only one expedition commanded by Hārūn al-Rashīd, son of al-Mahdī, in the latter part of the second/eighth century, who reached the Bosphorus. According to one tale repeated by the seventeenth century traveler Evliyā Çelebi, Hārūn besieged Constantinople twice and on the second occasion avenged the massacre of the Muslims of Constantinople by the Byzantines by hanging the Emperor Nicephorus in Santa Sophia (Bosworth, 1991-92: 2-3) whose warriors were the first ever to set eyes on Byzantium (Theophanes, 1883-85: 245-46, 332). This proved the last time that a hostile Arab army stood before the walls of the proud capital.

Caliph's al-Mu'taṣim's (r. A.D. 833-42) plan to besiege Constantinople in 838 failed, when the Abbasid fleet was destroyed in a storm. In the decisive battle of Poson, the Muslim army was almost entirely destroyed and 'Umar was slain. The victory was celebrated with great pomp at the Hippodrome in Constantinople (Mikaberidze, 2011: I. 219-25).

With regard to the events of A.D. 1182, Ibn Jubayr (1955: 327-29) relates a confused and inaccurate story. Ibn Jubayr presents the Muslims conquering Constantinople in A.D. 1182 although nothing of the sort occurred until the Ottoman conquest in A.D. 1453. Furthermore, it was the Latin inhabitants of the city who were slaughtered by the Byzantines in the attack he describes. The last sentence of his narration that is: "This conquest is one of the signs of the Hour", belongs to the Muslim apocalyptic literature, which developed in connection with the early military expeditions against the Byzantine capital in the second/eighth century. According to El Cheikh (2004: 200), these traditions – which were found in the earliest texts, and especially in *ḥadīth* compilations – were still suitable for inclusion in later texts.

8. Concluding remarks

As said in the beginning the Arabs created a fleet on the basis of the knowledge they found in certain individuals of the local peoples of the Near East who previously served the Byzantines. Among the places conquered by the Muslim Arabs were coastal towns and commercial ports. Some of these local men who knew how to construct and man a ship joined the conquerors and fought alongside them. Besides, there were dockyards both in Syrian and Palestinian coastal towns as well as in those in Egypt. That is why the Arabs managed in a short time to draft experts and organize effective fleets. Indeed, the Syrian and the Egyptian fleets played a great role in the early sea battles. These fleets served the early ambitious goal which was the capture of Constantinople and thus the realization of their aim to supplant Byzantium. In order to achieve this aim, the fleets organized by the Arabs followed the armies that besieged Constantinople. It is also said that Constantinople's conquest was seen as a means by which a ruler or even a whole dynasty might obtain the highest form of legitimization. The city's conquest was the ultimate goal for the conquerors and the principal justification for all of their efforts. The best documentation that we have of the Muslim community's general reaction to the failed sieges of Constantinople both by sea and land is contained in the apocalyptic literature. These came to be prophetic announcements that were attributed to the Prophet Muhammad or to any one of

his companions and that describe the signs and portents of the last hour and the tribulations that will precede it. Accounts of the apocalypse were widespread in the early community of Muslim believers. In fact, speculation about the end of the world was rife among all religious communities in the Near East at that time. Apocalypticism “could fit contemporary and social events into a transcendent scheme of meaning”, helping to account for the success of the Muslims (Hoyland, 1997: 27-28). Hence, Muslims’ battles with the Byzantines were identified with the so-called fierce battles (*malāḥim*), i.e. the final wars at the end of the world ending with the Muslim capture of Constantinople. The remnants of this material are scattered in collections of *ḥadīth* and in a few *fitan* (=trial) or *malāḥim* texts (Khalidi, 1994: 29). Some of these accounts attempted to articulate the theological and political relationship between the Muslim and Byzantine communities.

A number of traditions created a relatively comprehensive apocalyptic explanation for the failure to take Constantinople. The periodic emergence of apocalyptic texts and their accumulation usually indicates periods of tribulation, military defeat, or social and economic pressure. Once it became clear to the Arabs that the capture of Constantinople was not going to take place in the foreseeable future, predictions of a future conquest waned and were replaced by apocalyptic expectation. However, El Cheikh (2004: 66-67) is not sure if these traditions reflect the Muslim reaction to the repeated failures of the Muslim armies to conquer the city.

After the Muslim defeats and the failure of the repeated sieges of Constantinople, in particular, the Byzantines became the most challenging enemy of the Islamic state. By adopting an apocalyptic vision, the Muslims were giving way to realism and pragmatism, after they had attempted to conquer the city several times and failed. Constantinople was the real challenge and the real prize. The capital of the Byzantines was not only a wealthy city and a center of trade. It was also the center of culture and of civilization. The period of Umayyad rule was the one that saw the greatest and most intense Byzantine influence on the nascent Islamic civilization. Once Byzantine influence started to recede, Constantinople could not be totally ignored, but its capture was postponed to a remote future. Hence, the conquest of the Byzantine capital passed from the domain of politics and propaganda to that of legend and eschatology (El Cheikh 2004: 70-71). It is well known that the conquest of Constantinople was a transcendent, religious goal for the Muslims, especially after their failure in 717-718 to accomplish it (Canard, 1926).

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