

ARAB-BYZANTINE WAR, 629-644 AD

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Military History

by

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## ABSTRACT

ARAB-BYZANTINE WAR 629-644 AD, by LCDR David Kunselman, 111 pages.

Islam arose out of a cataclysmic change in society and economics in the Arabian Peninsula during the early seventh century. The adherents of the new religion immediately launched a campaign against the Byzantine Empire, the military, cultural and economic superpower of the age. In the course of just a few years the Arabs had conquered the valuable territories of modern day Palestine, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon from the Byzantines who in turn withdrew to Anatolia after great losses. This was the first encounter between Islamic and Christian people and the aftermath set the stage for the Islamic conquest of North Africa, the Crusades and many other historical conflicts. The paper seeks to answer the question “Why did the Byzantine Empire fail in the defense of these territories” by looking at diplomatic, military, economic and social differences between the Arab and Byzantine sides. The research is based on a variety of secondary sources and several translated primary sources. The conclusion is that the Byzantines failed to recognize and address the great social changes that were taking place in the contested region while the Arabs expertly exploited the dynamic situation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Letter

In 629 AD, the prophet Mohammed sent letters to the Kings of Persia, Yemen and Ethiopia and to Emperor Heraclius, inviting them to accept Islam. Mohammed stated, “If you become a Muslim you will be safe, and God will double your reward, but if you reject this invitation of Islam you will bear the sin of having misguided your subjects”.<sup>1</sup> It was an ultimatum, from an unknown holy man beyond the fringe of civilization to the most powerful rulers in the world.

Emperor Heraclius was the most powerful and successful ruler in the world. The Byzantine Empire controlled nearly all the land touching the Mediterranean, and had for nearly a century. Heraclius had defeated the only other significant power, the Persians, on their own land and had personally appointed the current Persian ruler. Constantinople and Alexandria were world-renowned centers of learning and art. Byzantine merchants traded from India to France. The relics of the True Cross were safe under Byzantine guard in Jerusalem. The seat of the Empire may have moved from Rome to Constantinople, the imperial language changed from Latin to Greek, but the empire of the Caesars was still great.

By 644 all this had changed. The mighty Byzantine war machine had been devastated and imperial forces driven from Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia by a small army of desert barbarians. The book industry in Alexandria was destroyed. The True Cross was in the hands of non-believers. The Muslims were building a new capital in

Damascus and a new temple in Jerusalem while the Byzantines were fighting a last ditch guerilla war in their Anatolian homelands.

### Questions

Why did the Byzantine defense fail? The obvious reasons do not seem to apply. The Byzantine Empire repelled the initial incursion by the Muslims in 629, so they can hardly have been surprised when the Arabs returned in 633. The Empire was at peace with all of its other neighbors. The Byzantine military was large and battle-hardened after a victorious 30-year war with the Persians, so lack of military acumen was not a factor. The Empire was the economic and political center of the world, able to call on allies and resources unmatched by any other country at the time. The campaign was fought on a relatively narrow front for the Empire; the Muslim forces could not bypass Byzantine forces in Syria or attack them from another direction. Heraclius himself, the most successful general in the western world, led the Byzantine armies<sup>2</sup>. There is no obvious reason why the Empire should not have been able to repel the Arabs.

Additionally, the Muslims appear to have been at a great disadvantage. The Muslim armies were simultaneously at war with the Sassanid Persian Empire and Byzantine Empire, fighting on two widely separated fronts<sup>3</sup>. The armies of both the Byzantine and Sassanid empires greatly outnumbered the total Muslim forces. The Arab army did not have a military tradition, nor experience in large-scale warfare. The leadership of the Muslim forces changed frequently as Mohammed died in 632 and was replaced by Caliph Abu Bakr who then died in 634 and was succeeded by Caliph Omar. The Arab homeland in Mecca was not a resource rich territory, and with Mohammed's audacious letter to the neighboring leaders it is unlikely they were developing much in

the way of trade or alliances. The Arabs had no major technological advantage; both sides used similar weaponry and armor. There is no obvious reason that Arabs should have had any advantage against an enemy, especially one so formidable as the Byzantine Empire.

Despite these seemingly unfavorable odds, the Arabs won. The Byzantine forces lost every significant battle, and had an entire army annihilated by an inferior force at Yarmuk. Cities that had withstood years in the face of advanced Persian siege-craft fell quickly before the Arabs. The Muslim conquests would have effects that outlasted both the Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire; the Middle East would remain dominated by Islam to the present.

It is the intent of this thesis to answer this question: Why did the Byzantines fail in the defense of these lands? What strategic, geographic, demographic and cultural factors contributed to Arab power during the invasion? What strategic, geographic, demographic and cultural factors diminished Byzantine power during the defense? Why did the field armies of Byzantium perform so poorly against the Arabs? Why did the cities of Syria and Palestine capitulate? What tactics and techniques were developed or used by each side during the campaign? How did these affect the outcome? Were there technological, societal, organizational, logistical or intelligence differences, which aided the Arabs or hindered the Byzantines?

### Focus and Limitations

This thesis focuses on the reigns of Caliph Abu Bekr (632-634) and Caliph Omar (634-644). Only actions and conditions in the area between the Taurus Mountains and

Arabian Peninsula will be considered, except if events outside the region have a major strategic implication to the campaign. This area includes the modern day countries of Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, western Iraq and Syria; but will be referred to generally as Syria in this paper and the people of these areas as Syrians. The historical, cultural, economic and military backgrounds of both the Byzantines and the Arabs will be examined. For the purposes of this paper, the Byzantines are considered to be the government and any subjects of the Empire, which includes most Syrian people. The term Arabs is used to refer to the people of the Arabian Peninsula who have a common linguistic and ethnic heritage, while the term Muslim refers to adherents of the Islamic religion; though during the conflict these two groups are the same.

All sources used in researching this topic were either written in English or translated into English. Translated sections from Arab in the Koran and Haditha, both of which are religious texts were reviewed for relevance. The paper includes sections translated from Greek and Latin of Maurice's Strategikon and other Byzantine military manuals. More unusual primary sources were studied, including sermons, icons, mosaics, architecture and archeological findings when they seemed appropriate to the cultural or military context.

There are numerous secondary sources from the Muslim point of view, ranging from histories written by scholars a couple of centuries after the events to detailed campaign analysis by modern military commanders. The Byzantine side is less rich, with older sources skirting around the disastrous campaign and modern sources being mainly focused on setting the stage for the Crusades three centuries later or on much later periods. Both have advantages and drawbacks, but the volume on both sides is adequate

to develop a balanced understanding of the people, nations and armies involved in this conflict.

The study of the earliest conflict between Muslims and a Western civilization has cultural implications, which continue to impact us today. It was during this campaign that Jerusalem became a contentious issue between Christian and Islamic people. The failure of the Byzantine Empire to stop the Muslim invasion gave the Arabs a fertile and resource rich base to launch a campaign of conquest that would turn North Africa away from Christianity, subjugate Spain for centuries and only be stopped in the fields of Tours. The Arab conquests would introduce new spices, the astrolabe, lateen sails, algebra and a new number system to the West. On the other hand, the Crusades, Barbary piracy, the current religious strife in Palestine and Lebanon, and even our Global War on Terror have roots which can be traced back to 7<sup>th</sup> century when a prophet from the desert declared war on the most powerful empire in Christendom.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Majid Ali Khan, Muhammad The Final Messenger (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service), 75.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kaegi, Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquest (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 65

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 67.



## CHAPTER 2

### THE ARABS

#### Battle of Uhud

In late March 624 AD, 3000 men of the Querish tribe formed an army and headed north from the small market town of Mecca to crush the forces of the tribal exiles once and for all. The exiles immediately responded by sending their best 1000 warriors southward to intercept the Querish before they reached the city. The two armies met at a volcanic ridge near the desert called Uhud.

The leader of the exiles arranged his forces across a chokepoint below the ridge, in order to limit the numerical advantage of his enemy by denying his flanks. He filed the infantry into a small valley, his cavalry on the gently sloping ridge to their right and placed his archers to anchor the line on the left from the top of a steep hill. The Querish aligned in the open plain with their infantry in the center and cavalry on both flanks. Both sides had their women to the rear to provide medical and moral support to the warriors.

The Querish infantry surged forward, but were brutally mauled and their leader killed in the assault. The exiles launched a quick cavalry charge on the right, shattering the line. The Querish fell back in shock. The retreat turned rapidly to a rout as the exiles pursued them mercilessly. The armies were quickly in the Querish camp and the exile infantry began looting while the cavalry mopped up fleeing soldiers to hold for ransom.

The young commander of the Querish cavalry had managed to keep his forces in check throughout the melee and now saw his opportunity. He coordinated a two-

pronged charge at the exile archers still on the hill and annihilated them. He then turned his force against the cavalry, which he promptly swept from the field. His attention returned to the looting infantry, which he drove into a defile against the ridge and slaughtered like cattle.

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Figure 1. Battle of Uhud

*Source:* Glubb, John. *The Great Arab Conquests*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. 1963.

By the end of the afternoon, the commander of the exiles was backed into a narrow crevice in the ridge, which was the only avenue for escape. He and fourteen companions were all that was left of his mighty army. The Querish held the field and the young commander of the cavalry decided it was not worth the lives of his men to pursue the exiles up such an easily defended route against an enemy so willing to sacrifice himself despite the odds. The few remaining exiles escaped when night fell.

The Battle of Uhud was insignificant on the world stage at the time. It was fought between two tribes in the great Arabian Desert, an area far from the centers of the great civilizations. It is, however, very instructive about what followed. It showed a tactical sophistication, which few believed these people possessed. The ferocity of combat and the tenaciousness of the exile forces would soon be widely respected. The desert culture of these armies would spread like wildfire. Their poetry would be sung on three continents, their language would become the language of trade and learning. The Querish cavalry leader, Khalid al-Waleed, would defeat the two greatest empires of the day and earn the moniker “Sword of Allah”. The leader of the exiles, Mohammed, would become the founder of one of the greatest empires in the world and the founder of one of the world’s great religions, Islam. This tremendous accomplishment only leads to questions: where did these people come from, what were they like, how did they become such powerful conquerors?

### Geography

Geography played a significant role in the growth of Arab culture and in influencing their interaction with other people. The Arabian subcontinent or “Island of the Arabs”<sup>1</sup> is a peninsula of about a million square miles, making it roughly the size of

Texas. It is bracketed by the Red Sea on the West, Persian Gulf in the Northeast, and Indian Ocean on the South and East. There are natural harbors on each body of water. Near the northeast corner is the swampy delta of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (see figure 2).

It is also ringed on three sides by mountains: to the North called the Hijaz are steep and tall; a range which spurs in toward Medina, Jabal Shammar is low and rugged and the South-western side of the peninsula is framed by high ridges called Jabal Nabi and Shu'ayb.

In the center of this frame of mountains and water is the Arabian Desert. There is little rain and only a few wadis crossing the bleak expanses. There are scattered life-supporting oasises except in the "Empty Quarter" in the South, which is devoid of most everything but endless dunes. Only the far southern edge of the peninsula receives enough rainfall to support agriculture above a subsistence level. This geography isolated the people of Arabia and caused them to develop a unique culture adapted to the bleak landscape.

### Pre-Islamic Culture

#### Tribalism

The Bedouin or nomadic people of Arabia were a wildly independent and insular people, largely due to the austere environment of the peninsula. They lived in small family groups and most had to relocate frequently to ensure adequate food and water was available throughout the year. This led to the development of a tribal culture, built on family ties. Tribalism was the most important feature in all parts of Arab life. It was the most important feature of their system of government. Tribalism affected the way they

conducted warfare. The tribe was even the basis of Arab morality and religion.

In theory, all members of a tribe had the same rights and privileges. In practice there was a strong tradition of old patriarchs making the important decisions for the tribe and these positions of honor were usually hereditary within one family of the tribe. In the hard life of the desert people did not always survive to take on their hereditary roles, so an accurate knowledge of ancestry was imperative to minimize power struggles within the tribe and “genealogies preserved by and reported from tribes”<sup>2</sup> were maintained in great detail. Tribal leaders had no rights to govern, but much influence and many responsibilities. Leader’s influence was generally personal in nature, with the majority of the tribe supporting wise and charismatic men. Their responsibilities included preparedness “in war to be ready to sacrifice their lives and in peace their possessions on behalf of fellow tribesmen”<sup>3</sup>.

Despite the generous example expected from tribal leaders on behalf of members, the tribes themselves tended to be jealous of the scarce resources in the deserts, particularly water and grazing lands. It was a matter of tribal survival to maintain access to adequate resources to support the population of the tribe. It was common knowledge that “anyone venturing into the territory of a strange tribe does so at the risk of being killed and robbed by these strangers”<sup>4</sup>.

The combination of natural dangers and the dangers posed by other tribes, resulted in an extremely close relationship between families within a tribe. The members of ones tribe would normally be the only friends, potential mates or allies one would ever know. Members of a tribe will stand by ”his brother in distress and may not ask if he is right or wrong”<sup>5</sup>. Loyalty to the tribe was a moral imperative surpassing religion, law or

even personal survival.

This extreme form of loyalty to the tribe had innumerable effects on Arabian culture, but perhaps the most important was the bellicose nature of the interaction between tribes. Specifically, “a person’s life, honor and goods were protected by his relatives, who were obliged to assist him in trouble and to avenge or seek compensation for him if he was wronged...therefore all adult men had to be able to fight”<sup>6</sup>. All men were warriors, and all would support any member of their tribe against any outsider. The honor of the person, clan or tribe was jealously guarded even when water or grazing land was not immediately at stake. An infraction on the honor of another clan would lead to a blood feud or possibly all out war.

The code of honor was another prevalent aspect of Arab culture. It was even noted by 5<sup>th</sup> century Roman historian Herodotus who stated “There are no men who respect pledges more than the Arabs”<sup>7</sup>. The honor system was especially powerful in the Bedouin or nomadic tribes, but was characteristic of the whole culture. Their “high sense of honor which determines all the actions of the Bedouin is the basis of his morality”<sup>8</sup> and led the Arabs to become some of the most trusted merchants in the ancient world.

### Towns

The nomadic Bedouin were the cultural heart of the Arab people, but their lifestyle was not the only one present in Arabia. In general, the desert did not provide all the resources needed to support the life of the Bedouin tribes. They needed grains in droughts, tools for hunting and materials to repair tents and clothing. There were merchants and farmers who filled these needs. These non-nomadic Arabs needed bases to live and work from. They needed towns.

The towns in Arabia developed differently than the nomadic tribes but took on many of the Bedouin characteristics. Major towns in the interior were essentially Bedouin in character, with local religions, few resources and dominated by a single powerful tribe. Towns in the southern and northern fringes would have some Arab features but be influenced by non-Arab civilizations, including Greeks, Romans, Persians and Egyptians. In general, the towns reflected the austere nature of the environment. Houses “consisted of an inner room and an outer courtyard, many identical houses next to each other”<sup>9</sup> and rooms were limited in size by the timber available for the roof, to about five by seven meters.

In the towns, the major tribal affiliations still held, but the Bedouin honor system was “softened a little by common interest in the holy artifacts and trade”<sup>10</sup> permitting a less violent interaction between tribes than was typical in the desert. The stratified economies of farmers, merchants and Bedouins in the towns involved more complex relationships between clans and differentiated clans by wealth. While the need for economic relationships dampened the tribal hostilities to a certain extent, the closer interaction and stratification could lead to even more brutal blood feuds between the clans when one started. For example, in Mecca at the time of Mohammed, “hardly anyone could leave his fortified grounds without risk”<sup>11</sup> due to the relentless blood feuds.

The wars and feuds would be put on hold for large festivals and markets associated with religious ceremonies. These “truce” days allowed interchange of ideas, poetic expression<sup>12</sup> and trade between tribes whether hostile or friendly. Towns in the South or on major trade routes would benefit from a large influx of outside traders at these times as well.



## Poetry

The only significant form of art practiced throughout Arabia prior to Islam was poetry. The majority of Arabs were illiterate and poetry was the only manner of passing knowledge from one generation to the next or from one tribe to the next. In short, “Arabs owed their awareness of constituting a people, in spite of all tribal contradictions, principally to their most important common spiritual possession, their poetry.”<sup>13</sup> Poetry was spoken in an Arabic that transcended tribal dialects and brought people together. The best poets were prized members of any tribe, providing entertainment, preserving knowledge and even gaining battlefield advantage by cursing the enemy.<sup>14</sup> Poets also enhanced and spread religious practice among the tribes.

## Religion

The original religious beliefs of the Arabs are a bit murky, but most scholars believe they were primitive, with an emphasis on the natural surroundings and the spirits who were believed to rule those surroundings. Simply stated, “up until about the fourth century AD almost all the inhabitants of Arabia were polytheists”<sup>15</sup>. They were largely open-minded and each tribe had its own gods, but people understood and respected the power of other gods.<sup>16</sup> In fact, it was an Arab saying that “When you enter a village, swear by its god.”<sup>17</sup>

This polytheism was often manifested by worshiping at a well or an unusual stone. The “Ka’bah” a large black stone at Mecca was venerated widely in the interior, but other “god stones” also existed as centers of worship in other cities. Frequently these stones were used as sacrificial alters with goats, camels, gold and frankincense being the most common sacrifices. Particularly bad times or unusually brutal tribes may have

caused more extreme sacrifices, as third century philosopher Porphyry notes, “the inhabitants of Duma in Arabia used each year to sacrifice a boy.”<sup>18</sup>

The enormous trade and military interchange with the Romans led to more spill over of Roman religion into the Arabian culture. Some gods became popular across the Peninsula. Two goddesses, a sort of Fate and Mother Earth, were popular in the civilizations in South Arabia. Allah, a sort of “father of gods” similar to Saturn, became popular in the interior during Roman times (100 BC-300 AD).<sup>19</sup>

Christian monasteries were established in Arabia as early as 340 AD, setting the stage for increased religious influence.<sup>20</sup> This continued to the point that “in the fourth to sixth centuries Christianity made major inroads into Arabia.”<sup>21</sup> Throughout the late Roman times, the growth of Jewish and Christian influence in Arabia accelerated the popularity of Allah as a similar monotheistic god. By the end of the sixth century AD, Allah continuing to grow in importance had replaced the moon-god Hubal as the god associated with the Ka’bah.<sup>22</sup> This contrast of foreign influences and Bedouin culture, along with geographic isolation, led to a uniquely Arab evolution in religion, further contributing to their sense of being a group apart, an independent people separate from the great powers of their time.

### Government

The Arabian Peninsula was a crossroads of empires. Rome, Persia, Abyssinia and both the Byzantine Empire and Sassanid Persia tried to influence Northern Arabs to control Arabia in general. Despite this, Arabia had maintained its long independence.

The only invasion of the interior of the Arabian Peninsula was in 24 BC by Aelius Gallus when he attempted to seize the incense lands in South Arabia for Rome. His

legions were “ravaged by thirst and hunger, betrayed by local guides, the Romans despaired and limped back to Egypt.”<sup>23</sup> In the end, the Arabs were “able to escape from political influence of the Roman Empire” just as they escaped all other would be conquerors.<sup>24</sup>

Even without outside conquerors, the Bedouin culture that maintained them as an independent people prevented them from expanding themselves. Their “kingdoms, based on powerful aristocratic families, prevented the emergence of any strong central power.”<sup>25</sup> The Kings of merchant cities Petra, Gerrha, Palmyra, Mecca, Medina, Qana, Marib capital of Saba (Sheba in the Bible) established local civilizations but none that spanned the deserts or incorporated even the majority of Arab people.<sup>26</sup> The Sassanian Empire dominated East Arabia (area including modern Kuwait and United Arab Emirates) beginning in 230 AD, but apparently maintained control through client states rather than by direct intervention and remained mainly on the coasts.<sup>27</sup> The Romans did much the same, clinging to the coasts and using Arab clients, in northern Arabia. Thus, Arabia always remained Arab.

Much of this autonomy was a result of geography, some a result of the ferocious warrior spirit of the Arabs, but much of it was sustained by the fabulous wealth of the South Arabian kingdoms and the Arab merchants who were able to use money, guile and frankincense to play the great empires against each other for centuries.

### Economy

The economy on the Arabian Peninsula was improbably successful considering the nature of the terrain. The Arab merchants provided the link between the world of

Europe and the East. They supplied the most valuable commodities and transported materials, people and ideas across some of the most forbidding landscapes in the world.

#### Trade routes

Arabia “occupies a central position between India, Africa, Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean world, which meant that people or goods passing from one to the other would be obliged to have dealings with them.”<sup>28</sup> The Arabs caravanned spices and incense to Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Levant beginning as early as 783BC.<sup>29</sup> By the first century AD they established a maritime link between Mediterranean, Arabia and India. The first century Greek historian Strabo writes “as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from the Egyptian coast to India.”<sup>30</sup>

This burgeoning cross-cultural trade enabled the Arabs to become wealthy while still maintaining their largely nomadic culture. They developed important towns along the desert trade routes, and even cities in the maritime south, but the majority of the Arabs continued to travel as Bedouin herders or powerful merchants. These merchants traveled widely, from the capitals of the Roman and Persian Empires to the shores of the Indian Ocean. They were familiar with numerous lands and were well aware of the great events happening in the world.

The largest and most important trade route passed from Marib, the capital of the southern Arabian kingdom of Saba (or Biblical Sheba) through the interior to Mecca and ended at Petra in the Levant. The entire route was in the desert and protected from non-Arabs by the terrain. “Mecca at this time was no sleepy hollow.”<sup>31</sup> In fact it was a busy, powerful commercial town “almost monopolizing the entrepot trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.”<sup>32</sup> It was also the site of a large trade market, a holy site,

and was the home of the powerful Querish clan. Perhaps importantly, Mecca was the halfway point on the Frankincense road.

### Frankincense

Arabia has been blessed twice in history with inordinate wealth. In modern times this wealth stems from the huge petroleum reserves in the sands of the peninsula. In ancient times it was the combination of location and frankincense, which made the Arabs wealthy.

Frankincense, a largely forgotten agricultural product made from the sap of the Boswellia tree, was the most valuable commodity in the world for thousands of years. It was worth many times its weight in gold and had a bewildering array of uses. Ancient peoples from Assyrian through Roman times used it to consecrate temples, make cosmetics, mask the odors of cremations, drive off mosquitoes and generally make life in a world without sanitation more pleasant.<sup>33</sup>

Frankincense seemed to be a boom commodity that would never go bust. In the fifth century BC, Herodotus stated, “Arabia is the most distant to the south of all inhabited countries and this is the only country which yields frankincense<sup>34</sup>. Pliny the Elder (first century Roman naturalist and military commander) wrote centuries later about the processing plants that “no vigilance is sufficient to guard the factories, before the workers are allowed to leave the premises they have to take off all their clothes” to prevent the theft of frankincense.<sup>35</sup> At time of Christ “more than 3000 tons of Frankincense may have been exported annually.”<sup>36</sup>

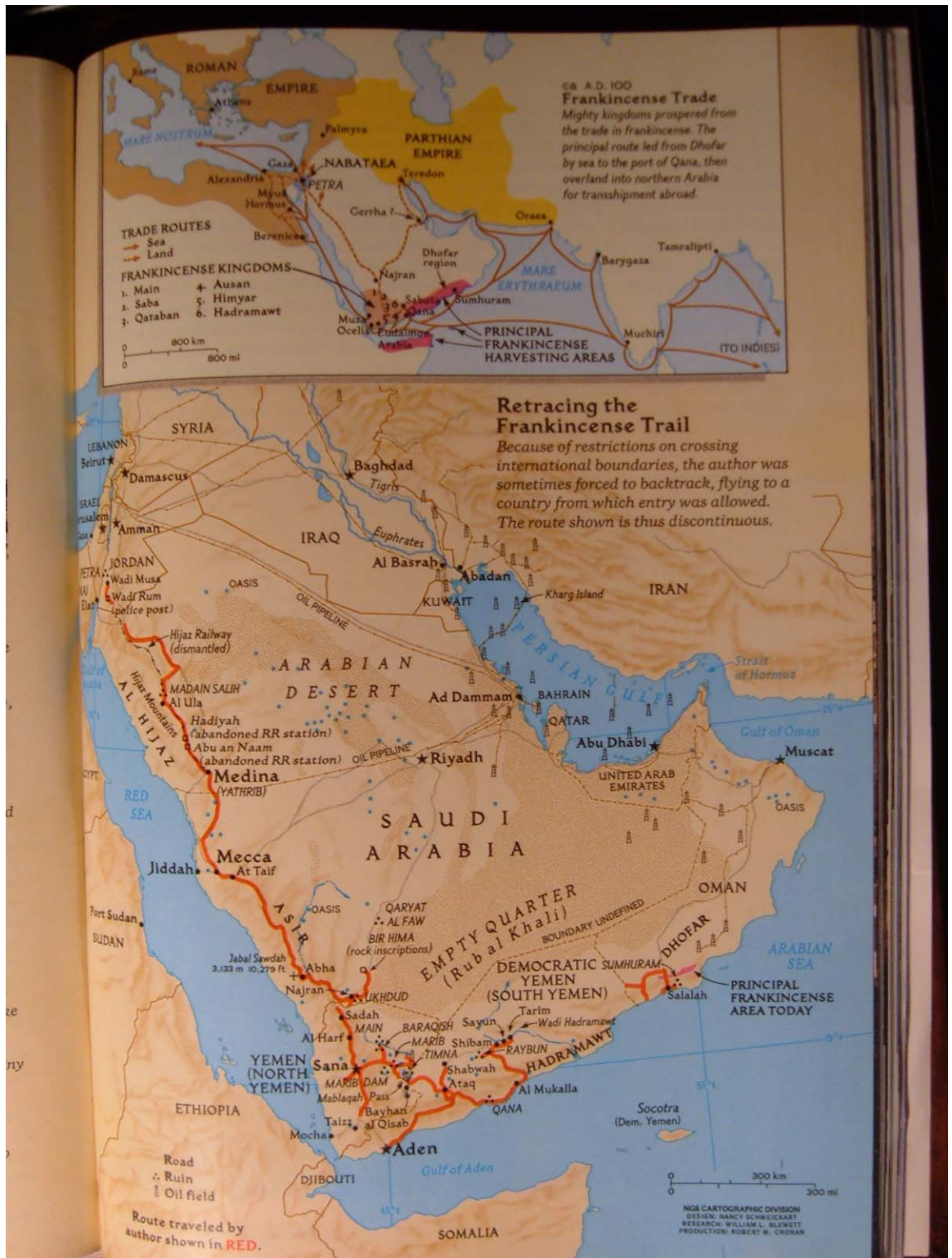


Figure 2. Frankincense Trade  
Source: National Geographic, "Arabia's Frankincense Trail", October, 1985. 485.

This staggering wealth only moved to the huge civilizations of Europe and Persia across the Arabian deserts in the caravans of Arabian merchants. This passage was “a rugged journey of some 80 marches” on camel or foot across the merciless Arabian Desert.<sup>37</sup> The Arabs carefully controlled the production sites and caravan routes. The merchant towns in the interior and the kingdoms in the South “developed a powerful cartel, a kind of OPEC of its time” to ensure the safety of their valuable cargo and its sources.<sup>38</sup> The Biblical kingdom of Sheba and the famous merchant cities of Petra and Mecca were built on wealth of the frankincense trade: all of Arabia profited. “The existence in south Arabia of frankincense, myrrh and other aromatics – all much in demand in the civilizations of the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia – brought wealth and renown to its Arabian cultivators and expeditors.”<sup>39</sup>

However, the trade of frankincense took a downturn in the late Roman period. First, Christianity spread across the empire like wild fire in the third century AD. “Christians wished to distance themselves from pagan and Jewish practices”<sup>40</sup> leading to a decrease in demand for frankincense and a mounting recession in Arabia. In the fourth century, “Romans banned pagan practices” including the use of frankincense.<sup>41</sup> The rapidly declining economic situation in Arabia was exacerbated when the dam of Marib which had served all of the South Arabian kingdoms broke and irrigation became impossible in 6<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>42</sup> This mounting economic crisis combined with agricultural disaster led to the movement of nearly the entire population of South Arabia northward in search of a new life during the second half of the sixth century.

### Demography

Up until the third century AD, the majority of Arabs still lived in the Arabian

Peninsula. Large numbers lived in the desert interior as nomads, more lived on the trade routes and fringes as merchants and a third large group lived in the south irrigating fields, receiving ships from India and harvesting frankincense. By the end of the fourth century the demographics changed dramatically. The major Arab governments in the south and west were collapsing with the frankincense market. The dam of Marib was breached flooding many croplands, destroying towns and making irrigation impossible in the south. People moved to the other areas of the Peninsula and Syria in order to survive.<sup>43</sup>

By the beginning of the sixth century AD, Arabs were living in Syria and Mesopotamia under Byzantine rule, in Iran under Sassanid Persian rule and in small numbers across the Peninsula.<sup>44</sup> In effect, the Arabs of the south had braved the deserts and hostile tribes of the interior to move to the areas on the northern edge of Arabia.

The trials and conflicts these people experience while spreading northward became a sort of national epic akin to Moses' exodus from Egypt.<sup>45</sup> The environmental, tribal and economic adversity they faced was unprecedented, yet they survived. A national identity was built, a common language and alphabet flourished. This movement cemented the cultural unity of Arabia while the encroachment into the lands controlled by the Sassanid and Byzantine empires further accelerated the emerging unification of the Arab people.<sup>46</sup>

### Formation of Islam

Shocked by the rapid collapse of the economy that had sustained their cities and wandering tribes, the Arabs fell into a cultural morass that made them even more despondent. Their agriculture could no longer support the population. Their neighbors were huge monotheistic and urban empires, which considered the Arabs as both



uncultured and heretical. The trade with India continued, but was in no way compensation for the collapse of the frankincense market. The people starved in the Peninsula and their culture was suppressed while their labors were taxed in the Sassanid and Byzantine Empires. This led to a deepening dissatisfaction and eventually a revolutionary change in the Arab people.

### Moral decay of Arabs

The Arabs in the late sixth and early seventh century were listless and lost people. They were no longer the wealthy powerful merchants they had been, but they still retained their fierce tribal loyalties.

The Arabs of this time blamed failures in their morality for the collapse of the economy and the south Arabian kingdoms. They had “familiar evils of a wealthy commercial society, extremes of wealth and poverty, an underworld of slaves and hirelings, social class barriers”<sup>47</sup>. The Arabs themselves were aware of these failings, as the early Muslim historian Ibn Hisham (ninth century) reports, “previously we were a barbarous people who worshipped idols, ate carrion and committed shameful deeds.”<sup>48</sup>

This moral collapse led to a fervor for a new religious foundation among Arabs. Many in the northern areas accepted the Byzantine orthodox Christianity, while many in Persia became Zoroastrians. In the interior, many charismatic leaders claimed divine inspiration and established new cults based on old pagan religions. The greatest new religious force was started in Mecca by a middle-aged merchant of the Querish tribe named Mohammed.

Mohammed was born into a noble family in Mecca but was orphaned at a young age, to be raised by his grandfather in a Bedouin tribe until he was a teenager. He

returned to Mecca and quickly became an important merchant captain. He started working for a twice-widowed woman with a large fortune who was ten years his senior. He soon married her, which elevated him to a position of wealth and leisure.

Mohammed developed terrible headaches during his fortieth year, which led him to seek respite in the desert mountains near Mecca. While visiting the mountains, he claims to have had revelations from Allah about the correct way to live and the proper observance of religion. These prophecies were revealed in a typically Arab format, beautiful poetry. He collected the poems in a book thereafter called the Koran.

Mohammed began teaching his new religion in Mecca and immediately had several converts. The first was his wife, but she was quickly followed by his father-in-law Abu Bakr, his friend and cousin Omar and his son-in-law Ali. The new religion was apparently popular among marginalized groups and the poor but disliked by the leaders of the Querish tribe. As Mohammed became more influential he started to denounce the idolatry and pagan rituals still dominating Mecca. In response, the Querish began persecuting new converts and even attempted to assassinate Mohammed.

#### Retreat from Mecca

In response to the persecution by the Querish, the new Muslims were either exiled or fled from Mecca. They accepted an invitation from the elders to come to a city about 250 miles north of Mecca on the old trade routes: Medina. This flight to Medina is known as the Hijra.

Mohammed spent the next eight years in Medina. During this time, he consolidated his hold on the faithful and developed the formal doctrine that would become the basis for the new Arab religion of Islam. It seems that the majority of the

people of Medina accepted the new religion rapidly. They formed pure a community of believers, converting or driving out Jews, pagans and Christians from the city. With power consolidated in Medina, Mohammed conducted a series of wars against Mecca which would eventually result in the conversion of most the Querish to Islam and the surrender of the city and the holy Ka'bah in 630 AD. Interestingly, this victory was achieved despite the total destruction of the army of Medina in the Battle of Uhud described in the introduction to this chapter. The Muslims lost several battles, but their perseverance and courage was so inspiring that it caused many of the Querish to convert after witnessing the power of the new faith.<sup>49</sup>

### Caliphate

Mohammed died two years after the capture of Mecca leaving the newly founded Muslim empire in a predicament.<sup>50</sup> Abu Bakr, the first male convert to Islam, was elected as the “leader of the faithful” or caliph when Omar, the second male convert and a brilliant politician, added his support to Abu Bekr's claim.<sup>51</sup>

During this crisis of leadership several allied Arab tribes initiated wars against the Muslims. Abu Bakr sent armies against each of them and put the newly converted Khalid in charge of an elite force that moved rapidly from one campaign to another to add decisive power and leadership against each enemy tribe. The strategy was incredibly successful, Khalid subjugated the entire Arabian Peninsula in a matter of weeks. The first caliph built the first Arab empire in history.

### Religion/State

This new empire was a theocratic state run by an overtly political religion.

Mohammed was a ruler, warrior and prophet ever since the time of the Hijra and the Abu Bekr was his successor as ruler, warrior and leader of the church. The state and church were one and the same. The Muslim armies fought with a courage inspired both by the ancient tribal honor system and by a new faith promising to its adherents that “they will be served with a goblet at a gushing fountain...and shall sit with bashful, dark-eyed virgins” forever if they died in service of Allah.<sup>52</sup> The resources of all the tribes were applied to the religious goals of spreading the realm of Islam, while the religion was carefully crafted as a political tool to incorporate new people into the society of the Arabs.

This Caliphate erupted onto the international scene in late 632 AD with a surprise military excursion into both Persia and Syria. Both the Sassanians and Byzantines were utterly confounded by this new force arriving on their southern borders. Both empires dispatched armies of allied auxiliaries to deal with the threat, only to have those armies annihilated by numerically inferior Muslim forces.<sup>53</sup> It was the first taste of a new type of war. A political war waged for religious reasons by a passionate and determined group of military evangelicals. It was called Jihad.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Brockelmann, , Moshe Perlmann, and Joel Carmichael, *History of the Islamic Peoples* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), p 1.

<sup>2</sup> Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*. (New York: Routledge, 2001), p9.

<sup>3</sup> Brockelmann, p5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p4.

<sup>6</sup> Hoyland, p114.

<sup>7</sup> Herodotus translated by Abrey De Selincourt, *The Histories* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954), p205.

<sup>8</sup> Brockelmann, p5.

<sup>9</sup> Hoyland, p17.

<sup>10</sup> Brocklemann, p6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p9.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p12.

<sup>15</sup> Hoyland, p139.

<sup>16</sup> Brockelmann, p8.

<sup>17</sup> Hoyland, p139.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p185.

<sup>19</sup> Hoyland, p186.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p30.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p147.

<sup>22</sup> Brockelmann, p9.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Abercrombie, "Arabia's Frankincense Trail," *National Geographic*, vol 168, no 4 (1985): p496.

<sup>24</sup> Brockelmann, p3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p3.

<sup>26</sup> Abercrombie, p485.

<sup>27</sup> Hoyland, p28.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p1.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p60.

- <sup>30</sup> Hoyland, p44.
- <sup>31</sup> H.A.R. Gibb *Mohammedanism; an Historical Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p17.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, p17.
- <sup>33</sup> Abercrombie, p484.
- <sup>34</sup> Herodotus, p248.
- <sup>35</sup> Abercrombie, p484.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, p484.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid, p482.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, p487.
- <sup>39</sup> Hoyland, p2
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid, p107.
- <sup>41</sup> Abercrombie, p509.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid, p499.
- <sup>43</sup> Hoyland, p230.
- <sup>44</sup> Brockelmann, p53.
- <sup>45</sup> Hoyland, p233.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid, p230.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, p9.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, p9.
- <sup>49</sup> A. I. Akram, *The Sword of Allah : Khalid bin al-Waleed, his life and campaigns* (Karachi: National Publishing House, 1970), p49.
- <sup>50</sup> Matthew Gordon, *The Rise of Islam* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), p11.
- <sup>51</sup> Brockelmann, p51.
- <sup>52</sup> N.J. Dawood, *The Holy Koran* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p446

<sup>53</sup> Akram, p232.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE BYZANTINES

#### Roman Rule

476 AD was not a year of particular note in the Roman Empire. The Empire had ruled the Mediterranean basin for a millennia, during which it had faced numerous challenges, lost territories, regained them, suffered terrible setbacks and revolutions, but had always persevered. That year, Rome was sacked for the fourth time, but the empire did not shudder. The capital of the Empire had moved to a new city. In 330 AD, Emperor Constantine had re-founded the old Greek colony of Byzantium into the new capital of the Empire, renaming that colony Constantinople. The sack of the cradle of the Empire and the ravaging of Italy by Visigoths was seen as a temporary setback.<sup>1</sup> The Roman Empire surged on, still the epitome of civilization, wealth and power it had been for countless generations. Within the space of a few decades, a series of ambitious emperors had once again placed Rome under Imperial rule. By 560 AD, Imperial soldiers under Emperor Justinian again patrolled the Via Appia, the seas were ruled by Imperial ships and the barbarians driven from Italy, Spain and Morocco. The knowledge, power and language of the ancient Romans was still a reality. The glory of Rome had merely moved from the Tiber to the Bosophorus.

In 565 AD, when Emperor Justinian died, there was every reason to believe the Empire would be the most powerful nation in the world for another thousand years. A strategically powerful geographic position, a huge population relative to other nations, an ancient and influential culture, a diversified and vibrant economy, a sophisticated government, and creative diplomatic corps all contributed to the aura of invincibility of



the Empire. This aura would turn out to be an illusion. A mere seventy years later, the political and military might of the Empire would be reduced to a fraction of its glory under Justinian, but it was a collapse which the Byzantines did not foresee.

### Geography

Following Justinian's restoration, the Byzantine Empire was the largest nation in the world. Its limits stretched from Spain, down both shores of the Mediterranean to include Southern France, Italy, the entire Balkan Peninsula, all of Africa north of the Sahara, Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Anatolia. It stretched across the Anatolian headlands to include the interior, most of what is now Georgia and Armenia, the Crimea and most of the shores of the Black Sea.

The Empire was a maritime power, built around two large seas and its capital was at the point of confluence of those seas. Despite this maritime character, the empire included a vast range of topography. The flood plains of Egypt, abutted the desert sands of North Africa in the South. In the West, the plains of Spain and marshes of France curved around to the Alps and Dolomites in the North. East of the large mountains were the rugged forest of the Balkans and the steppes of the North coast of the Black Sea. The Eastern frontier led from the Caspian Sea through Mesopotamia to the Arabian Desert. It was a nation with every kind of terrain, almost limitless resources and tied together by seas patrolled by the most powerful navy in the world.

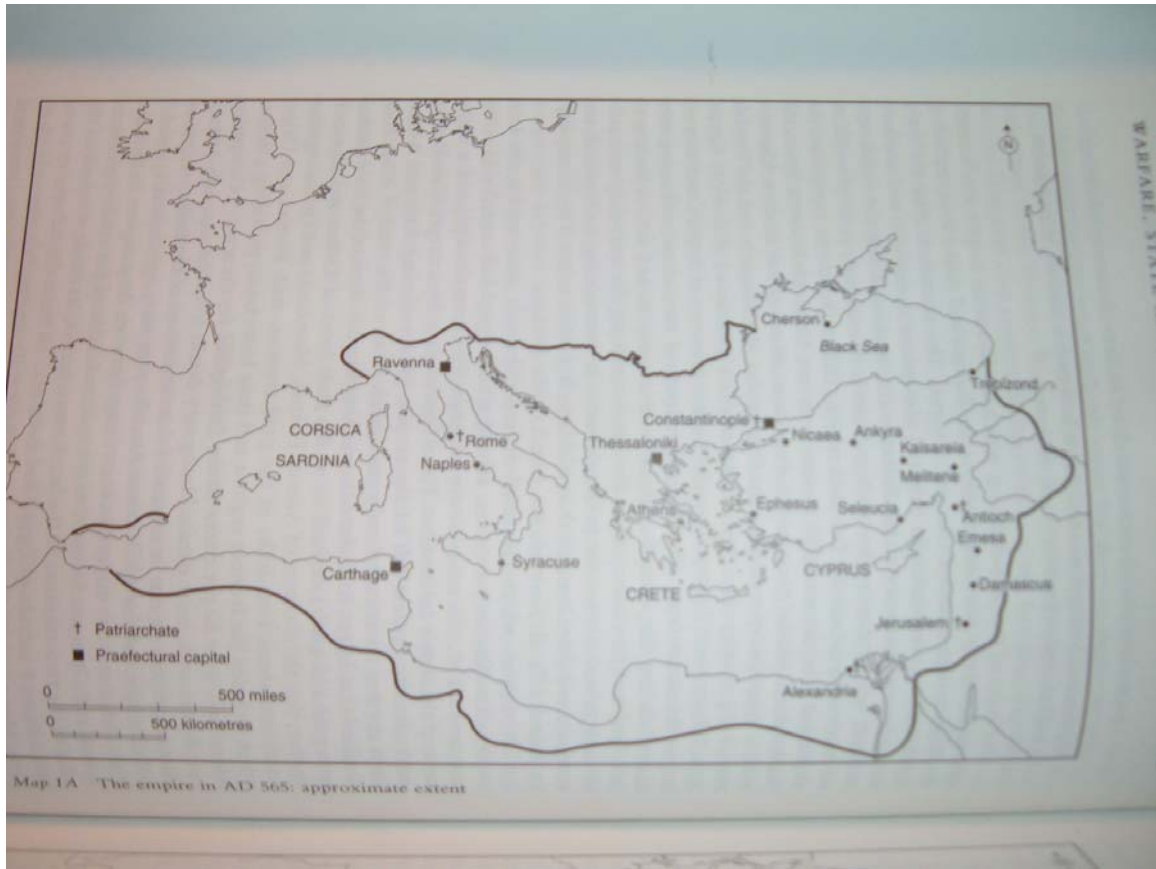


Figure 3. Byzantine Empire in 630 AD

Source: Haldon, John. *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-120*, London: UCL Press. 1999.

The political terrain was not quite as benign as the natural. The Empire was bordered by barbarian Avars in the Balkans and Crimea. Italy and France faced the growing Frankish kingdoms. Nomadic desert tribes were an irritation in Africa and Arabia. The most difficult border however, was the Eastern border with the great Sassanid Persian Empire

The Byzantine Empire inherited the long-standing border and rivalry with the Persian Empire from Rome. The border between the two great empires had shifted back

and forth across Mesopotamia and Syria for centuries. The ancient Romans first fought to gain control of this slice of land in 92 BC. The various Persian dynasties and Caesars periodically would renew the war, make modest gains or suffer modest losses without either side ever establishing an advantage.

### Demography

Part of the reason neither the Byzantine nor Persian empire was ever able to establish an advantage and conquer the other was that they both faced huge demographic hurdles. Both were huge, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nations. This was further aggravated by the people native to the land in question, Arabs and Jews who did not want to be ruled by outsiders from either empire.

The population of the Byzantine Empire was largely agrarian, with nomads on the fringes and large, prosperous cities in Anatolia, Greece, Egypt and Syria. The eastern part of the Empire was largely free of barbarian incursions and did not suffer depopulation similar to Italy and Spain.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to estimate the actual population of the Empire, but Constantinople alone is estimated to have a population in excess of 500,000 people<sup>3</sup>. Other important cities such as Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria and Rhodes would certainly have added many thousands more, to say nothing of the huge peasantry required to support urban populations of this size.

## Culture

### Roman

Probably the most important aspect of Byzantine culture at this time is that it was Roman. In fact, “to the Byzantines, their empire was none other than the Roman Empire, perfected through Christianity, and they admitted no distinction or discontinuity from antiquity.”<sup>4</sup> This sense of continuity with ancient Rome pervaded every aspect of their culture. They continue to write in Latin, prize military prowess and build on a grand scale with Roman style decoration. They had a millennium of cultural and political dominance to revere and contemplate. With the growth of Christianity, they also had a unifying religion, which admitted no other god is equal to theirs. They believed they were superior culturally, militarily, intellectually and morally.

This sense of superiority was so engrained to their culture that “the Byzantines persisted in regarding themselves as the only civilized nation” and called all non-Byzantine people “barbarians”.<sup>5</sup> This self-confidence was well placed, but “they continued to treat the rest of the world with condescension” which on occasion led to diplomatic and military blunders.<sup>6</sup>

While the empire included many people who were not Christian or Roman, these did not have a large impact on the culture of the Empire as a whole. At the other end of the spectrum, the people of Anatolia were very patriotic, considered themselves Romans, Orthodox Christians and defenders of both the state and religion.<sup>7</sup> It was their empire, their culture and their art to which the rest of the world looked in wonder.

### Art

Byzantine art in this period was even more invasive than the imperial armies. The

modes of decoration were copied across Europe while “its churches became the pattern for those in Russia and Italy.”<sup>8</sup> For centuries “Byzantine art was the ‘regulating art’ of Europe” against which all other art was modeled and judged.<sup>9</sup>

The Byzantine artists produced mosaics, sculpture, icons, jewelry and clothing that were the envy of the world. The true expression of Byzantine art was to be found in their churches. They developed a new style of church radically different from the old Roman temples which was to dominate ecclesiastical architecture until the arrival of the Gothic style 500 years later. Inevitably, the greatest expression of their greatest art was in their greatest city. Emperor Justinian started the Church of Santa Sophia or “Holy Wisdom” in 532, to be “a church, the like of which has never been seen since Adam, nor ever will be”<sup>10</sup>. Its scale dwarfed any other Christian building constructed for 1000 years. It is a tribute to the vibrant Byzantine culture at the time since it was built in less than 5 years, consecrated on 27 December 537 by Justinian’s successor Justin II. It remains today the gem of the crown city and a testament to their belief in their cultural superiority.

### Cities

Constantinople was the greatest city in the world in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Medieval Arabs felt that “no other place in the world was comparable in size, in geographical location and in importance.”<sup>11</sup> This glowing praise for its geography was justified by a superb location on a promontory overlooking one of the best natural harbors in the world. Furthermore, this harbor sat on the Bosophorus, which at the time was the most important waterway in the world, connecting the Orient with Europe. The massive population of the city dwarfed any European or African cities. Politically, it remained the

heart of the Empire and, to the Byzantines at least, civilization. It dominated the empire, but it was not the only city.

The long periods of security in the Roman East had led to the growth of numerous cities, which provided resources for the Byzantine Empire. Damascus and Aleppo were large cosmopolitan cities, which were transit points for Arabian and Indian spices and incense. Antioch was terminus of the Silk Road and a center of Christian theological creativity. Jerusalem was the spiritual cradle of Christianity and a destination for pilgrims from all over Europe. Alexandria, the ancient Greek city dominating Egypt, controlled nearly inexhaustible agricultural resources and was the home of the greatest repository of ancient knowledge in the Great Library. All of these cities were important and added greatly to the powerful economic engine, which gave the empire such resilience over the centuries.

### Economics

The huge expanse and enormous expenditures of the Empire were sustained by a diversified and vibrant economy. The largest part of this economy was agricultural, but even in agriculture the vast variety of geography encouraged diversification.

Small farm holdings were the most common form of economic activity throughout the empire. These holdings were jealously protected by government, even to the point of breaking up large holdings. This was largely a fiscal expedient as small farm holdings were distributed to soldiers, saving payroll and limiting necessity for mercenaries.<sup>12</sup> Small farms produced nearly everything necessary for the survival of both rural and urban populations. These small, generally prosperous farms grew cereals

and grapes, “fruits, medicinal herbs, cotton and mulberry trees” in the coastal regions.<sup>13</sup> In the interior lands they produced “abundant cattle, sheep and pigs were bred as well as horses for the racecourse and for the needs of the army.”<sup>14</sup>

A maritime nation such as the Byzantine Empire needed more industry than just farms to thrive. The Balkan “forests gave the material necessary for house construction and shipbuilding.”<sup>15</sup> These materials were then floated down river to the coastal cities where ships were built and merchant could carry the timber to the major cities where it was needed.

The large cities had manufacturing industries, which produced “silk fabrics, the heavy gold brocades”, reliquaries, elegant glassware, ivories that were the envy of the West<sup>16</sup>. Most of these industries were tightly controlled by trade guilds, which both protected secrets and controlled prices for goods. The bulk of these goods were used in the cities by the court or the churches, but many were also transported across the Empire to sell in foreign markets.

Geography played a huge role in international commerce. The Empire was “situated at the junction of the communications between Asia and Europe, and Europe and Africa; all routes, by land, sea or river, connecting eastern Europe with the Mediterranean passed through Byzantine territory.”<sup>17</sup> The Empire was at center of overland trade routes between Europe, Syria, China, India, Arabia, Russia and Scandinavia. The Western terminus of the Silk Road from China was in the Byzantine city of Antioch, while the Northern Terminus of the Frankincense route was in Byzantine controlled Palestine.

The sea routes were just as important as those crossing the land. The Byzantine

Empire “controlled the coasts where the great trade routes of the world debouched; its merchants gathered up and then distributed throughout the Mediterranean countries all that those routes brought in.”<sup>18</sup> This debouching and distributing was greatly aided by the enormous Byzantine merchant fleet, which was called “the mistress of the seas.”<sup>19</sup> So dominant was this combination of geography and fleet that the Empire largely controlled the European trade in spices, perfumes, precious stones, incense and rare metal and had a complete monopoly on raw silk. To the East, Byzantine merchants exported wine, pelts and caviar to the Orient. Byzantine craftsmanship in enameled glass, fine fabrics, and jewelry was exported to three continents.<sup>20</sup>

The extensive trade links the Empire maintained required an advanced system of finance. Christian morality in the government made this a little more complicated since “money-lending at interest was forbidden by law.”<sup>21</sup> The lack of money lending was largely addressed by the strength of the Byzantine currency. It was a standardized coinage which, “Emperors hardly ever had recourse to the practice, then so common, of debasing the coinage.”<sup>22</sup> Over the centuries the reliability of this currency had made “the Byzantine gold piece, the nomisma, the veritable international coin.”<sup>23</sup> It was used as a medium of commerce throughout Europe and even copied by later Arab invaders.

This powerful economy was undoubtedly the most successful in early Medieval Europe. Succinctly, the “Byzantine Empire was indisputably the richest and most populace State in Christendom.” This wealth was so extraordinary that a contemporary stated “two thirds of the world’s wealth is to be found at Constantinople.”<sup>24</sup> While this was definitely an exaggeration, there is no doubt that the Empire was an economic superpower and her neighbors were well aware of that fact.



Despite this awe-inspiring economy, by the latter half of the sixth century, Byzantium was in dire straits fiscally. Emperor Justin II had squandered many of the gains his father made and began a series of costly wars and internal disputes which outlived him and his immediate successor right up until the selection of Maurice as emperor in 582. The result was that “from the moment he assumed the throne of Byzantium, Maurice had to face one overriding problem: lack of money” Maurice was determined to set the finances of the Empire back on a firm footing.<sup>25</sup> His parsimony has become legendary. He made some terrible errors as a result of his drive for economy. First, he “refused to ransom no less than 12,000 prisoners taken by the Avars, who consequently put them to death”. He followed this cold-hearted decision with another; he cut military rations by a quarter, which led to mutinies in Italy and Spain. He finally destroyed his own reign when he decreed the army should quarter in the Danube during winter of 602 instead of coming home to spend Christmas with their families. The army, already distressed by his miserly actions elected Phocas, one of their generals to lead a rebellion and overthrow the government.<sup>26</sup>

### Government

The Imperial budget has been estimated at as much as 640 million gold coins at the time Maurice began his reign.<sup>27</sup> That would be approximately 400 billion dollars at current gold prices, but the purchasing power would be relatively more in Byzantine times. This was a huge sum by any measure, and a proficient bureaucracy was necessary to distribute it properly.

Fortunately, the “Byzantine administration was strongly centralized and wisely

organized.”<sup>28</sup> There was a large professional bureaucracy to address everything from military matters, to engineering to tax collection and paying tribute to allies. The bureaucrats even ensured that grain was distributed from Egypt and other rich growing areas to the cities and famished regions by the navy at government expense.<sup>29</sup>

While the Empire theoretically still had an Imperial Senate, the entire bureaucracy was beholden directly to the emperor. The salary or “*roga* (cash payment) was distributed once a year to the higher functionaries by the emperor himself” to ensure their loyalty. The lower level bureaucrats and tax collectors were paid by assistants, but “the file past the Emperor lasted three days.”<sup>30</sup>

The problem with any monarchical system government is that no matter how loyal and competent the administration, if the monarch is inadequate the whole country will suffer. Byzantium had its share of great leaders such as Justinian, but in the late sixth century Justin II was the emperor. He went mad sometime in 574 and would “try to hurl himself from windows, which had to be fitted with bars for his protection”<sup>31</sup>. His mother Sophia appointed Tiberius to be co-regent. Tiberius was elected emperor in 578 but died in 582. On his deathbed, he followed ancient Roman custom and adopted a successor, a young general named Maurice who had recently reorganized the army and led successful campaigns against Persia and the Turks.

Maurice immediately set about reforming the government. He first established Exarchates at Carthage and Ravenna to rule Africa and Italy under military government.<sup>32</sup> This gave the local military governor or *stratego* the power to organize the entire province for defense and was a major revision from civil government. This was necessary because war with Persia had flared up again and the field armies were needed

in the East. The war dragged on until Persia erupted into civil war in 591. Maurice aided one of the claimants to the throne, Chosroes II who then succeeded in seizing the Persian crown. The two negotiated a peace settlement, which gave Byzantium all of Mesopotamia west of the Tigris. This was a huge diplomatic coup for Maurice; at one stroke he gained an ally in his most powerful neighbor, ended a long war and got an unprecedented territorial concession. Unfortunately, this is the time when his parsimony with the army caught up with him. In 602, Phocas led his Army out of Bulgaria and marched into Constantinople.

Phocas assumed the crown, but Maurice was still alive and in hiding. Chosroes used the overthrow as an excuse to initiate a new war against Phocas and reverse the concessions he had made to Maurice. The only general in the East at time was an ally of Maurice, Narses who began a counter rebellion against Phocas rather than defend against the Persian onslaught. Phocas withdrew his armies from Balkans to counter problems in East and began a purge, which killed his best generals<sup>33</sup>. Over the next several years, Persia seized Syria and much of Anatolia, while the Avars occupied most of the Balkans. Phocas's main response was increasing paranoia and wholesale persecution of Jews and anybody associated with Maurice.

In 609 AD, the Exarch of Carthage, one of the last appointees of Maurice, promoted his son, Heraclius to General of the Army and sent him to Constantinople. Heraclius arrived with a fleet and a small army and was immediately welcomed into the city by the disillusioned populace. He assumed the crown on Saturday 3 October, 610.<sup>34</sup> He had Phocas brought to the Imperial palace where he personally killed and beheaded the former emperor.

Heraclius was taking a huge gamble by assuming the crown in Constantinople. “Never had any of his predecessors inherited so desperate a situation. To the west, the Avars and Slavs had overrun the Balkans, their raiding parties regularly approaching the gates of Constantinople; to the east the Persian watch-fires at Chalcedon, immediately across the Bosphorus, were clearly visible from the windows of the imperial palace.”<sup>35</sup> Things continued to get worse; Antioch was seized in 611 and Damascus in 613. Jerusalem fell to the Persians in 614 who then massacred the population and seized the relic of the True Cross as booty. Egypt was overrun in 617 eliminating the breadbasket of the Empire.

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Figure 4. Campaigns of Heraclius  
*Source:* Glubb, John. *The Great Arab Conquests*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. 1963.

Heraclius reacted to these disasters with brilliant foresight and calm. He continued running the provinces of Italy, Africa and Spain under Exarches, now called Themes led by a Strategos. Soldiers were settled in the Themes receiving land grants instead of cash in exchange for service. He increased taxation, fined Phocas's cronies, got subsidies from the Orthodox Church based on a promise to restore Jerusalem and the True Cross. In 619 he established a truce with Avars.

Finally, in 622 Heraclius launched his campaign against the Persians. He removed the army from besieged Constantinople launched an attack on Persia through Armenia, circumventing the Persian forces. The Patriarch and citizens held the city while Heraclius fought a series of campaigns behind enemy lines, which led to the plundering of Ctesiphon (the Persian capital) and execution of Chosroes in 628. Persia's armies were destroyed and all disputed and conquered lands were returned to Byzantium. Persia would never recover. Heraclius led the victory procession into Constantinople with the True Cross at the front in September 628 and then made a pilgrimage to return the Cross to its rightful place in Jerusalem.

### Religion

When Heraclius entered Jerusalem with the True Cross, he was not only basking in the glory of his military triumphs, he was also fulfilling his responsibility as the religious leader of the world. The fact that "the Emperor was not only a prince; he was also the head of the Christian Church" is frequently forgotten in our society with a strong separation of church and state, but in the Byzantine Empire the state and the church were like different departments in the same agency, with the emperor the leader of both.<sup>36</sup>

This unity of church and state made the issues of heresy and religious schism very important topics for the emperors. In theory, all of Christendom was Orthodox and under Roman suzerainty. Reality was quite a bit different. The barbarians in the west still claimed Roman heritage, but lived in feudal communities and followed the Pope in Rome on religious matters. Areas of the Balkans and Crimea shifted political control and were largely followers of the Arian heresy, who did not believe Christ was divine. Much of Africa followed the Nestorian version of Christianity and the leadership of the Patriarch of Alexandria. Most of Egypt and Syria followed a Monophysite philosophy. Traditionally, the Empire was pragmatically tolerant of all forms of Christianity.

During the 6th century this tolerance began to diminish. Emperors began to believe that they needed a strong, centralized religion to unite the diverse peoples of the Empire. Various councils were appointed to reconcile the various sects, but on the whole these were unsuccessful.

Frustrated by this lack of success, imperial policy changed. In 571, the Emperor Justin “abandoned his earlier policy of guarded toleration in favor of open persecutions.”<sup>37</sup> Many Egyptians were unhappy with the elimination of Nestorianism (their preferred version of Christianity) and the ascendancy of Constantinople as religious center over Alexandria.<sup>38</sup> The rift widened rather than closed between the two sects.

Relations with Rome were icier yet. The eastern and western churches were locked in a constant power struggle, based more on worldly issues than spiritual ones. The Pope continued to claim supremacy in all matters theological, while the Emperor and Patriarch of Constantinople considered their theology more lawful. The rift greatly widened under Maurice and Pope Gregory “the Great”; apparently these two powerful

personalities were irreconcilable.

The largest of the religious problems was the Monophysite debate. The Monophysite theology, claiming there was only one nature of Christ, was in direct contradiction with the Orthodox belief in two natures (divine and human). This doctrine was the dominant belief in Egypt, Syria and most of the borderlands with Persia.<sup>39</sup> Emperor Zeno tried reconciliation in 491 AD, which managed to anger the Pope, the Patriarch of Constantinople and the masses of Monophysites in the East.<sup>40</sup> By 511 AD the Monophysites were mounting a low level insurgency in Syria and even marched on the Imperial Palace in Constantinople, a full-scale revolt was narrowly avoided.<sup>41</sup> The controversy even plagued the brilliant Justinian, who issued numerous edicts condemning other sects but feared to address the Monophysite while engaged in the renovation of the Empire. His successor, Justin, confiscated Monophysite churches and drove their monks from the convents. The debate would continue unresolved until Jerusalem, one of the centers Monophysite faith fell under the Persian invasion in 608 AD.

The Persians were greatly aided in their invasion by yet another marginalized religious group, the Jews. Jews lived in small numbers in most cities throughout the Empire, but were a large percentage of the population throughout Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. They were generally treated like other non-Orthodox religions, though there had been occasional persecutions over the centuries. This changed dramatically during the reign of Emperor Phocas (602-610). This paranoid emperor “launched an all out campaign for the persecution and forcible conversion of the Jews.”<sup>42</sup> Why he did this while facing invasion from Persia is inexplicable, but the Jewish reaction was predictable. They revolted in Antioch, Jerusalem and numerous other cities in the East. The Jews

massacred Christians wholesale, the Christians responded in kind. Jews across Syria openly allied themselves with the Persian invaders. Cities full of battle-weary, religiously disaffected Monophysites and Jews fell to the Persians in short order.

### Diplomacy

Perhaps the greatest enduring strength of the Empire was its clever and ruthless diplomatic strategies. The Roman Empire had always maintained an influential diplomatic strategy; the Byzantine Empire raised it to an art. The Byzantines admired diplomatically adroit leaders who could bring enemies under the suzerainty of Byzantium without bloodshed<sup>43</sup>, and the emperors understood that even expensive diplomatic coups are cheaper than military victories.

Despite their disdain for foreigners, the Byzantine understood that successful diplomacy requires an understanding of the other party. In fact, “the study of the barbarian world was the constant care of the imperial court. Among the departments of the chancellery was one called the Bureau of Barbarians.”<sup>44</sup> This typically Byzantine bureau studied the weaknesses, strengths and personalities of all the neighboring nations and leaders. It ensured that “notes were kept of the most influential families, what presents pleased them best, which of their sentiments or interests might be most usefully cultivated, and what political or economic relations might be established with them.”<sup>45</sup> In short, it was a standing diplomatic intelligence agency.

Good intelligence was not the only part of the Byzantine diplomatic strategy. Emperors “granted annual subsidies and gave magnificent presents” to neighboring leaders.<sup>46</sup> The strategos granted Roman titles to leaders to appeal to the vanity of those



leaders. The primary goal of this largesse was to get neighbors to aid in the defense of the Empire by becoming allied states, providing forces at the fringes of the Empire.

This tactic was remarkably successful when pursued with care. The Empire maintained treaties with Khazars, Ghassinid Arabs, Croats, Serbs, Armenians, Russians, and Pechengs. By creating these alliances, the Empire eliminated potential enemies and gained buffers against other enemies. Most of the Empire's most stable borders were held by these allied states.

Where the Empire failed to develop allied satellites, it aimed "to divide its opponents, to neutralize them by playing one off against another and to foment jealousies, grudges and clashes between them."<sup>47</sup> The Empire would subsidize one side and then another or grant titles to both. The Byzantines typically had a much more sophisticated understanding of the internal politics of their adversaries than any of the "barbarians" could hope to have of the Imperial court.

The ceremonies of court were also an instrument of the diplomatic strategy. Byzantium "pursued a policy of pomp and prestige, designed to display the material resources and intellectual superiority of the realm."<sup>48</sup> Visitors to the court would be awed with feasts, performances and elaborate displays (such as a throne on an elevator and automata worked from precious metals) designed to impress and intimidate. The court itself was a tool in the hands of the diplomatic corps. The Emperor

"kept at his court a whole staff of claimants to all the thrones in the world. The sons of many princes were brought up in Constantinople in the luxurious surroundings of the palace; the victims of civil war were also welcome there: unsuccessful pretenders and vanquished competitors"<sup>49</sup>

This “staff” of claimants gave the emperor a ready resource to foment rebellion in hostile nations and a way to nurture future alliances.

### The Crisis in Syria

The previous discussion describes how the Roman Empire had continued to live on after the fall of Rome in the form of the Byzantine Empire. It remained the intellectual, religious and economic center of Europe. Its people continued to be patriotic, its arts and court were a wonder to all beholders. Its army and navy dominated the entire Mediterranean basin. Its diplomats crafted a unified and economical strategy that had sustained the Empire for centuries. By 630 AD, even the Persian menace that had vexed the ancients lay prostrate at the feet of Emperor Heraclius. The Byzantines had every right to be proud of their heritage and every reason to expect continued success in the future. There was but one thorn in their side in early 7<sup>th</sup> century; Syria.

Syria had suffered terribly during the Persian wars. Cities changed hands from the Byzantines, to Jewish revolutionaries, to the Persians and back to the Empire again. Massacres had created huge rifts among the population, while an eight-year occupation had distanced the sentiments of the people from the Empire. In parts of Syria the “occupation lasted fifteen years, a whole generation up to and including young adults-in an era of short life-spans, perhaps half the total population-would never have experienced Byzantine rule at all.”<sup>50</sup> Long-standing religious divisions were still unresolved. The economy was in shambles after being the frontline in a 50-year war. Matters were so grave that Heraclius spent the first three years after his victory on a whistle-stop style

tour of Syria trying to reconstruct the Imperial apparatus and eliminate corruption.

Despite this intense focus on reconstructing Syria, somehow the Byzantine administration made some grave oversights regarding Syria during this time. First, no further attempt was made to reconcile the Monophysite faith with Orthodoxy. Secondly, the professional army was withdrawn from Syria to support a new campaign in the Balkans. Third, and most grave, the Byzantines quit paying the subsidy to the Ghassinid Arabs.

The Ghassinid tribe had been loyal allies of the Empire for centuries. Originally these Arabs had prospered on the Frankincense trade in southern Syria, but they had slowly become an almost exclusively mercenary outfit supporting the Empire with intelligence about Persia and events in the Arabian deserts. The Ghassinids had become Christian (Monophysite of course) and had received many Byzantine titles and gifts. The Ghassinids had even provided part of the invading force into Persia. In 629 AD the Ghassinids fought and won a brutal battle against a new threat, a large religiously motivated army from the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>51</sup> This encounter, near the town of Mu'ta was the first conflict between the Muslims and Byzantium. Despite the long-standing relationship, strategic placement and loyal support, the money was cut off in 630 AD. In one stroke, the Empire lost a buffer against an unknown enemy, lost its intelligence capability and a standing army in southern Syria, and irritated a powerful group of warriors. It was a diplomatic blunder of unprecedented scale and would cost the Empire dearly.

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<sup>1</sup> John Norwich, *Byzantium The Early Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1989), p173.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Baynes and H.S.L.B. Moss, eds., *Byzantium; an introduction to East Roman Civilization*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p52.

<sup>3</sup> Baynes and Moss, p53.

<sup>4</sup> El-Cheikh, p21

<sup>5</sup> Baynes and Moss, p53.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p54.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p119.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p107.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p107.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p166.

<sup>11</sup> Nadia El-Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), p140.

<sup>12</sup> Baynes and Moss, p56.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p59.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p59.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p59.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p62.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p63.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p80.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p81.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p57.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p71.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p71.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p68.

- <sup>25</sup> Norwich, p275.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p276.
- <sup>27</sup> Baynes and Moss, p78.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p74.
- <sup>29</sup> John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century : The transformation of a culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p26.
- <sup>30</sup> Baynes and Moss, p75.
- <sup>31</sup> Norwich, p 270.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p 273
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p 280.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p283.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p284.
- <sup>36</sup> Baynes and Moss, p76.
- <sup>37</sup> Norwich, p270.
- <sup>38</sup> Baynes and Moss, p96.
- <sup>39</sup> Haldon, p49.
- <sup>40</sup> Norwich, p181.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p187.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p281
- <sup>43</sup> Baynes and Moss, p54.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, p54.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p54.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., p55.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p57.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., p57.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p60.

<sup>50</sup> Fred Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*.(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), p100.

<sup>51</sup> Akram, p83.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE WAR

#### Conflicting Goals

After the consolidation of the tribes in the Arabian Peninsula, Mohammad determined to unite all the Arab speaking people under the banner of Islam. In 629, he began sending exploratory forces into Syria and Iraq to offer a stick or a carrot to the large contingents of Arabs in those areas.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Heraclius was trying to rebuild the Empire after the decisive but costly defeat of Persia in 628. Byzantium was “trying to reconstruct their tribal alliances from the ground up, extending their ties among the Syrian and northern Hijazi nomadic groups in order to form the defensive coalitions needed to guard Syria from the southeast. It was, just this effort to extend their political control over these tribes that made the Byzantines appear such a threat to the Muslims, who also aspired to bring the tribes under control.”<sup>2</sup> A conflict between the two empires was inevitable. It was a war, which would pit a brilliantly led and highly motivated force against the most sophisticated military machine in the region. Both sides would be surprised and frustrated by their enemy.

#### Arab Forces

The armies of the Muslims were greatly expanded by the consolidation of Arabia, but they were still tribal forces. Warfare was part of everyday life for the majority of the Arabs, but they were not a professional army. Their equipment, modes of operation and tactics were those of tribal desert warriors.

## Equipment

The equipment of a Muslim warrior was his personal possession, neither provided nor regulated by the army. As such, there was a vast variety of equipment in use in the army. In general, the “principal weapon was the sword, though lances and spears were also carried”<sup>3</sup>. This was not the scimitar that would become popular later, but “the *sayf*, the straight, hilted sword.”<sup>4</sup> The *sayf* was both a thrusting and a slashing weapon of about “96cm in length and 6-7cm in width.”<sup>5</sup> There was quite a variety of this basic design. Most were produced, cheaply, in Arabia, but “the best swords came from India, followed by those made in the Indian fashion in Yemen.”<sup>6</sup>

The spear used by the Muslims “was a thrusting weapon with an iron point” of about 6-7m in length.<sup>7</sup> It was “almost always an infantry weapon; cavalry duels were typically fought with swords.”<sup>8</sup> The spear was used mainly to halt cavalry attacks as it was ineffective as an individual infantry weapon and the Arabs did not train to operate as a phalanx.

The most devastating weapon in the Muslim arsenal was the bow and arrow. Muslims forces did not move against an enemy unless their “bows and arrows supplied covering fire.”<sup>9</sup> Hunting and tribal raids developed these skills among most Arab men and “archery was highly esteemed among the Muslims”<sup>10</sup>. Both horse and foot archers used composite bows made of horn, wood and bone with a double S shape.<sup>11</sup> These were made specifically for the individual warrior and could be deadly out to range of 180-240 meters, though they were not accurate much beyond 70 meters.<sup>12</sup> Concentrations of Arab archers were brutally efficient on the field of battle and earned a formidable reputation among their enemies, for example: “a Persian who fought at the battle of Qadisiya



commented on the superiority of Muslim over Persian firepower.”<sup>13</sup>

Muslim soldiers also used a variety of items for defense, though they occasionally would face an enemy with just sword in hand. Armor “was highly prized, and was doubtless imported from the more technically advanced nations like the Persians or Byzantines. It normally consisted of a pot helmet and coat of chain mail.”<sup>14</sup> It was extraordinarily expensive and “mail was passed on from one generation to another as a prized possession.”<sup>15</sup>

While mail was a sign of wealth, shields were available to far more warriors. Shields were made of wood or of leather stretched on a wood frame. Normally, they were round and less than a meter in diameter<sup>16</sup>. The small size and light construction were critical if the shield was used by a Muslim warrior who also planned to fire his bow at the enemy.

The Arabs were as technologically advanced as most armies of the day, but they were not prepared to assault cities. The main Muslim siege weapon was a “swing-beam engine, similar to the trebuchet used in Western medieval siege warfare.”<sup>17</sup> Despite the advanced technology, there were not many fortified cities to gain experience at siege warfare in the Arabian Peninsula. As a result “early Muslim use of artillery against fortified enclosures was sporadic and largely ineffective.”<sup>18</sup>

### Infantry

Despite the modern image of mounted Arab armies sweeping across the desert, the backbone of the Muslim forces during the 7<sup>th</sup> century was infantry. This infantry, which “included substantial numbers of foot archers, aided by the high degree of mobility and flexibility of their armies, seems to have been a key factor in their victories against

Roman (Byzantine) and Sassanid forces.”<sup>19</sup>

This superiority came in spite of the fact that the “Arabs could not fight a close-order infantry battle.”<sup>20</sup> They did not have sufficient armor nor were they trained to fight in close well-disciplined ranks. Additionally, “they had not heavy support weapons.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, they fought as a flexible, light infantry. Their “archers mostly fought on foot” and drew their *sayf* when the enemy closed.<sup>22</sup>

### Cavalry

Wealthy Arabs, as wealthy people throughout the medieval world, rode their horses into battle. These horses were already a distinctive and hardy breed which, would develop into the modern Arabian.<sup>23</sup> The Muslims used both mares and stallions in combat.<sup>24</sup> They were careful to ensure the horses were rested for combat and “the horse was led alongside the camel until needed for fighting.”<sup>25</sup>

The Arabs, and their enemies in the region, had stirrups and used lances extensively. Lance combat techniques were apparently still undergoing innovation as the Muslims couched lances “both along the withers of the horse and over the head between the ears.”<sup>26</sup> The cavalry were used as both a shock force against the flanks of an enemy and, more importantly, as a pursuit force to chase down routed enemy soldiers.

### Motivation

The Muslim armies were a highly motivated force with almost mythical morale in the face of powerful enemies. Much of this can be attributed to the fervor their young religion instilled in the force, but the promise of paradise was far from the only force motivating the conquering armies.

Clan solidarity was a powerful force in the Arab culture. As discussed in an earlier chapter, loyalty to the clan and tribe was more important than any other form of morality. This loyalty ethic was extended to the entire *umma* (community of Islam) by Mohammad. Within the *umma* soldiers were highly respected and “success in war gave them the prestige and the means to find resources beyond those of pastoralism.”<sup>27</sup>

Prestige was not the only resource a Muslim warrior earned. There were tremendous economic rewards as well. Lists or diwan were kept of all warriors on campaign so they could be paid cash salaries.<sup>28</sup> These salaries were paid for life and grew larger the more campaigns the warrior fought. Even more lucrative was the division of spoils after a battle, when each man was given a portion of all captured equipment, money, horses and even people. Persons snatched in a raid or during a route would often be ransomed.<sup>29</sup>

Bravery was especially rewarded in the Muslim army. A “warrior who won a duel took all the possessions of his vanquished foe, and this was apart from his normal share of the spoils taken in battle.”<sup>30</sup> The possessions of an enemy leader vanquished in a duel would frequently include prized body armor and weapons. Furthermore, generals would give extra gifts to soldiers who did well in a battle (as much as 10,000 dirhams, roughly the yearly salary of a general).<sup>31</sup> The combination religious, societal and economic rewards greatly motivated the Muslim armies.

### Doctrine

It is almost impossible to discuss Muslim military doctrine. One author states: “Arab methods of warfare at this period were so haphazard that no such deduction can be made.”<sup>32</sup> There was very little predictability, uniformity or consistency in the leadership,

organization or even strategy in Arab armies, much less anything resembling professional literature.

Generalship was a tenuous affair in Muslim armies. “Men were appointed to command armies for many different reasons: they were loyal to the regime, they could recruit followers and attract men to their service, they could organize the collection and payment of revenues and they were effective and knowledgeable commanders in battle.”<sup>33</sup> He could also be fired for lack of bravery, lack of skill in command, because another man was more loyal to the Caliph or even lack of piety.

Usually armies were organized in tribal units and “tribal groups appear to have fought as separate units.”<sup>34</sup> Some tribes were larger or more war-like and would have larger contingents, while others would be smaller. Parts of a tribe would also be separated into different armies to keep any popular tribal leaders from usurping power from the men appointed by the Caliph.

Grand strategy was centrally directed and the “Caliphs in Madina exercised a considerable degree of control over the armies.”<sup>35</sup> While the distances involved required that individual generals have great latitude in fighting campaigns, “communications between the capital and the front lines in Syria and Iraq may not have taken much more than a week each way.”<sup>36</sup> The Caliphs maintained a good strategic picture of the wars and directed generals to move forces to accomplish the most urgent tasks. A lack of formal doctrine was not a great hindrance to the Muslims.

### Tactics

Muslim tactics during their early wars were creative and played to their strengths. They exploited their knowledge of the deserts, used the tenets of their religion to

undermine enemies, and used their native skills to counter more traditional military prowess.

The Arabs were at home in the desert and used the wastes as both a highway and a sanctuary. They moved rapidly in and out of the desert with “camels providing the main means of transport of men and materials.”<sup>37</sup> The camel was an integral and crucial part of the Muslim army, providing strategic transportation for forces, moving logistics trains and in emergency, acting as a food and water reserve for the forces. The Muslim armies “were extremely light and mobile, and their tactics consisted of a wild charge, of advance and retreat and turning movements, cutting communications and supplies.”<sup>38</sup> Endless tribal warfare had made them expert guerillas. Their skill had been famous for centuries. Ammianus Marcellinus, almost 150 years before Mohammad, talks of Malechus, an Arab leader who had worked for Sassanids coming to surrender to Julian after a major Byzantine victory: “they were gladly received since they were well suited to guerilla warfare.”<sup>39</sup>

Islam provided the Arabs advantages on campaign. It was not long before their enemies knew that an unbeliever “even if overtaken in arms fighting against the Muslims, had only to call out profession of faith and his life must be spared.”<sup>40</sup> This chance for mercy and even assimilation enabled the Muslims to gain new recruits and gave enemies an alternative to fighting to the death.

Desert life did not give the Muslims experience with heavy cavalry similar to their more advanced enemies, but it did give them skills, which could counter the cavalry. They learned to use spears “with devastating effect against cavalry charges.”<sup>41</sup> Caltraps were also used to impede the advance of cavalry.<sup>42</sup> Most importantly, “Muslims’ archers

may have shielded their cohorts from the full force of the Sassanian and Byzantine heavy cavalry and thereby neutralized their superiority in this respect.”<sup>43</sup>

No one characteristic of the Muslim army was sufficient to defeat the Byzantines. Instead, the Muslim religion combined with desert warfare skill and superb archery was to prove an efficient combination for winning battles during the war. The openness of Islam to converts would weaken many opponents when faced with showers of deadly arrows coming from an unexpected direction. Mercy was a weapon for the Arabs.

### Byzantine Forces

The Byzantine Empire had a military tradition stretching back millennia. The Imperial war machine was rationally organized, superbly equipped and well trained. There was a large navy, a sort of national guard called the Themata, a professional field army, advanced artillery (including a secret weapon) and sophisticated body of doctrine.

### Navy

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Byzantium had the most powerful fleet in the Meditterrean. It was larger, better equipped, organized and trained than any contemporary navy. The empire had reorganized the fleet after the collapse of the western part of the Empire and “the organization of the fleet was an original creation of the Byzantines.”<sup>44</sup> It was led by a “*Strategos of the Carabisiani*” and two admirals and consisted of around 300 ships.<sup>45</sup> The ships were mostly purpose-built oared galleys, which were ideal in the benign waters of the Meditterrean. The fleet was designed and operated as an offensive arm of the Empire, moving armies and supplies between theatres and around enemy strongholds.

The navy was a powerful force to which few enemies could respond.

### Army

The ancient Roman system of legions was slowly reformed to respond to barbarian invasion long before the rise of Islam. By the time of Justinian (6<sup>th</sup> century), the armies of the Empire had been completely reorganized and the principal fighting arm had switched from infantry to cavalry. There were still infantry, but they were part of a type of local militia. The cavalry included both the locals and the elite professional mobile force.

### Themata

The new organization was based around the *Theme*. It was essentially geographic area, which was obligated to train and equip a certain number of soldiers of different types. The thematic armies could be called upon as a sort of militia to protect the local area but would also provide men to aid the Imperial field armies when necessary. The theme usually provided light cavalry to the field armies, but would have a large mix of cavalry and infantry for defense.<sup>46</sup>

The *theme* system depended on two other sources of troops to fight the wars of the Empire. First were the *fedorati*, which were a collection of soldiers from satellite states and mercenaries. Most of the *fedorati* were cavalry, though the most crucial against the Arabs, the Ghassanids were largely an infantry force. The second important source of non-thematic troops was the emperor's personal army of professional heavy cavalry.

## Infantry

Infantry were largely ignored by the Empire, to such an extent that Maurice prefaces his chapter on infantry with “infantry tactics, a subject which has been long neglected and almost forgotten in the course of time.”<sup>47</sup> This is not to say they were not used, but they were largely local forces to provide security in the rear area and movable sanctuary for the decisive cavalry arm.

The *thematic* infantry was a sophisticated team with a mix of capabilities. There were heavily armed foot soldiers who Maurice states “should have shields of the same color, Herulian swords, lances, helmets.”<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, by this time the economic might of the Empire could not guarantee all would have armor, so “the picked men of the files should have mail coats, all of them if it can be done, but in any case the first two in the file.”<sup>49</sup> In addition to these armored columns, there were also “approximately one-third of the infantry should be light-armed archers.”<sup>50</sup> These men carried “bows on their shoulder with large quivers about thirty or forty arrows” as well as shields, javelins and spears.<sup>51</sup>

The infantry was organized in regular units of one thousand men which were subdivided several times down to a ten man squad. Each infantry squad was accompanied by its own light logistics wagon with “a hand mill, an ax, an adz, a saw, two picks, a hammer, two shovels, a basket, some coarse cloth, a scythe, lead-pointed darts, caltrops tied together with light cords.”<sup>52</sup> This ensured that there would always be adequate equipment to construct defenses and re-arm soldiers who lost or broke weapons during a battle. The thematic infantry, despite neglect by the military bureaucracy was potentially a formidable force.



## Cavalry

The Byzantine army was built around the mobility of the cavalry. Light cavalry provided by the *themes* and some *fedorati* patrolled the vast frontiers and conducted raids against enemies. The Imperial heavy cavalry acted as a strategic reserve and would move to trouble spots as needed.<sup>53</sup>

An unusual mix of light cavalry was recruited from client states and the *themes*. Mostly they were armed with swords, bows and lances. Particularly famous were the Avar horse archers and the Armenian cavalry. All in all, these were effective forces but they were of variable quality and reliability.

The core of the Byzantine army was the very well equipped and professional Imperial cavalry. This was a multi-purpose force, which could both fight at a distance or charge with shocking force into an enemy army. This force had several names over the centuries, including *Scholae*, *Comitatus*, and *Kataphraktoi* but it was always a highly professional and elite force.

The professional soldier of the Imperial cavalry was the best-trained and equipped warrior of his age. He trained to “shoot rapidly mounted on his horse at a run.”<sup>54</sup> He performed regular formation drills, including wheels and turns with large units. He was protected with hooded coats of mail and helmets and armed with sword, bow and two cavalry lances “of the Avar type.”<sup>55</sup> Even the horses had “protective pieces of iron about their heads and breast plates of iron or felt.”<sup>56</sup> He rode in a saddle equipped with stirrups and solid seat to provide a good platform for fighting.<sup>57</sup> The professional cavalry was expected to have cloaks, tents, and at least two servants with extra horses.

The major drawback to the Imperial heavy cavalry was the cost. The only way a

professional force like this could be maintained was to keep it small. Therefore, it was stationed in central areas of the Empire and deployed as needed to areas of conflict.<sup>58</sup> The heavy cavalry probably numbered about 40,000 in the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century, but a large portion was typically kept in the Balkans to suppress the Avars.<sup>59</sup> It is likely that a significant portion of the remainder of these troops were part of the force occupying northern Iraq.<sup>60</sup>

### Siege equipment

The Byzantine army built on its Roman heritage and developed sophisticated military engineering and siege craft techniques. They used both tension (bow like) and torsion (catapult) type machines to throw both rocks and bolts.<sup>61</sup> The Byzantine army also used a large swing-arm counter weighted trebuchet, which was more sophisticated than the one used by the Arabs.<sup>62</sup> To support their field armies, the Byzantines had a torsion machine “mounted on carts and swiveling from side to side,” a sort of mobile artillery.<sup>63</sup>

Beyond the creative use of traditional artillery, the Byzantines also had some non-traditional equipment. “Perhaps the best-known Byzantine artillery device is the liquid fire projector.”<sup>64</sup> This “weapon consisted of a tube attached, via a leathern swivel joint, to a sealed canister” which contained a combustible liquid mixture popularly known as “Greek fire.”<sup>65</sup> The clever Byzantine inventors were able to scale the device down to a hand-held flame thrower and up “as a large-scale projector for use on board ship and in sieges.”<sup>66</sup>

## Doctrine

Byzantines had a rich and sophisticated body of doctrine reflecting their serious and professional approach to war. The officer corps of the army was literate and critical, producing works such as the Anonymous Treatise on Strategy (circa 630) and Nikephoros Treatise on Skirmishing (much later but describes the tactics of the “Shadowing War” discussed later).<sup>67</sup> There was also great weight given to military thought by emperors, best exemplified by Emperor Maurice’s Strategikon but also by works commissioned by other emperors.

The army was organized in a rational and uniform manner based on groups of ten, one hundred, one thousand and ten-thousand men. These units organized and led in a very structured manner with non-commissioned officers, junior officers, field grade leaders and generals. The sergeant, called a dekark or file-leader, led a group of 10 men both in drill and battle. Junior officers were titled Moirarch, and acted both as a deputy to a leader of a column and could lead detachments to perform special tasks. Field grade officers or Menarchs led columns of cavalry or infantry, a unit of 1000 men. A general or *Strategos* would lead an army of 10,000 men or a combination of several of these with other generals working for him.

Generals served at the pleasure of the emperor, but were career military officers, not political appointees. The need for professional leadership was recognized by Emperor Maurice: “the best general is not the man of noble family, but the man who can take pride in his own deeds.”<sup>68</sup>

The two major doctrinal texts that remain from this era show the professionalism of the force. The Strategikon and Treatise on Strategy have detailed chapters on logistics,

training, drill and formations, tactics, leadership, combat engineering, sieges, gathering intelligence, command and control, military discipline and punishment of criminals and cowards. They show diagrams of formations and fortifications. They discuss the modes of warfare of principal enemies, the minutia of preparing a march camp and the considerations a general should have when planning a grand campaign. The body of Byzantine doctrine is both sophisticated and informative.

The tactics of the Byzantine army were focused on the professional Imperial cavalry attacking the enemy and using a line of infantry as a refuge. The professional soldiers were also expected to perform flanking movements and to screen the flanks of the formation. There seems to be a distrust of the auxiliary forces, as Maurice places the professionals on both flanks and in the front.<sup>69</sup> This distrust seems counterintuitive based on Heraclius's successes against the Sassanids, but it may have had some grounding in truth based on what would happen in the war against the Arabs.

### Campaigns

In 629, Mohammad ordered several of his generals to take armies in different directions to locate and attempt to convert other Arab speaking peoples to Islam. He also sent the famous letter to the rulers of the world, including Heraclius, giving them the opportunity to convert. It was an audacious move and one that would certainly lead to war.

One of these armies of conversion moved northward from Madina to convert the Ghassanid Arabs from the Nestorian Christianity. This led to the first encounter between the Muslims and the Byzantines near the town of Mu'tah (as discussed earlier) on the

southern edge of Palestine in 629.<sup>70</sup> At first, the Muslims tried to negotiate a conversion, but the offer was rejected. Next, a Muslim raiding force was sent to the area to extract revenge for the killing of an emissary by the Ghassanid Arabs.<sup>71</sup>

The raiding party encountered a large force of Ghassanid infantry possibly backed by a small contingent of Byzantine soldiers in flat area adjacent to a date grove. The leader of the Muslims, Zeid ibn Haritha, followed the tradition of the wars of conversion in Arabia and ordered a charge into the Byzantine force. The Muslims were rapidly cut down and several prominent leaders killed. Khalid ibn al-Walid, the same leader who just a few years ago had defeated Mohammad at Uhud (see chapter 2) but was newly converted to Islam, took command.<sup>72</sup> Khalid recognized the situation was untenable and “then by retiring methodically, the survivors under Khalid’s firm leadership, withdrew from the field.”<sup>73</sup>

The first encounter between a Byzantine force and a Muslim force had not gone well for the Muslims. Khalid saved the army and the Muslims promoted a brilliant leader, but the Ghassanid auxiliaries held the field. Ironically, this easy victory may have convinced the Byzantines that the Muslims were not a serious threat which contributed to Heraclius’s decision later to cut the subsidy to the Ghassanids.

## Persia

After Heraclius smashed the Persian army and Emperor Chosroes was killed, he set up a program to rebuild Persia as a friendly but independent nation. Chosroes successor, Siroes was paranoid that another member of the royal family would usurp his new crown and so murdered all his competition. It was to no avail as “Siroes himself was murdered after a reign of only eight months. This sent Persia into another crises since all

the male members of the royal family had been put to death, no legitimate successor to the Crown could be found.<sup>74</sup>

In 632, the Persians were in no state to be fighting another war. The Muslims, on the other hand were rampaging. Mohammad died that year and many tribes had revolted and committed apostasy. Mohammad's successor, or Caliph, was Abu Bekr. Abu Bekr immediately launched forces toward each of the rebellious tribes and quickly brought them all back in order. The general sent to the border with Persia was none other than Khalid ibn al-Walid again. He suppressed the apostasy there and then immediately moved on to convert the Arab tribes in southern Iraq.

It was not long before the "Arabs overran the rich agricultural country east of the Euphrates."<sup>75</sup> Khalid quickly learned that the "Persians were unable to operate in the desert"<sup>76</sup> and would retreat to the desert every time the Persian army threatened to defeat him. The "Arab strategy was based on the fact that they were secure in the desert and could raid settled areas as they liked."<sup>77</sup> It began to seem that the Arabs acted with impunity while the Persian forces were impotent.

Khalid caused some tribes to convert and won several battles against the Persians. He was preparing for a new season of raiding in the Euphrates area when Abu Bekr ordered him to Syria. Khalid's efforts would pave the way for other generals to conquer all of Persia in the next few years, but in 633, Abu Bekr was orchestrating a concerted effort to bring all the Arab tribes in Syria into the fold.

#### Dathin

In the early spring of 633, Amr ibn al Aasi was dispatched to Palestine, an "area with which he was familiar from his commercial travels before the rise of Islam."<sup>78</sup>

His mission was to negotiate the conversion the Ghassanids and other Arab tribes in the area. He held negotiations with the local commander but engaged the local forces with vengeance when the talks broke down.

The local Byzantine commander gathered his forces and moved to drive the Muslims out of Palestine. Amr ibn al Aasi “engaged and defeated a Byzantine force at Dathin on track between Aila and Gaza.”<sup>79</sup> It was the first defeat of a Byzantine force by the Muslims. It was not the last.

After Dathin, the Muslims won a string of small victories against local forces. They raided towns and ransomed civilians. In hopes of stopping this chaos, a force of 5000 Byzantine and auxiliary troops from Caesarea led by a commander named Sergius marched southward to meet the Muslims. Sergius and his force were defeated at Araba.<sup>80</sup> Amr, not willing to let the defeated army retreat, began “pursuing the retreating enemy, he overtook them again and inflicted further casualties including Sergius himself.”<sup>81</sup>

Another force, under Abu Ubayda, was active in the Golan region and seized a town called Ma’ab.<sup>82</sup> Shortly thereafter, Amr ibn al-Aasi subjugated the Arab tribes in the Negev.<sup>83</sup> Muslim armies moved at will through the deserts and struck where they wanted.

At first, the Muslims avoided major cities. They were focused on consolidating control over the Arab tribes in the Byzantine area most of whom lived in the hinterland.<sup>84</sup> The Caliph kept sending reinforcements to Syria to support the consolidation over the next year, and the Muslims continued to be a menace.<sup>85</sup>

The Byzantines became alarmed as the raiding parties became armies and started attacking towns. It was not long before Abu Bekr found himself involved in major

operations in Syria and Palestine. He “wrote Khalid ibn al Waleed to come from Iraq and reinforce the Muslims.”<sup>86</sup> Khalid received the order in March 634. He immediately gathered the best of his soldiers and made an epic eight day march across the desert with no supply train (see figure 5 ). It was a risky move, but when Khalid arrived near Palmyra it was a complete surprise to the Byzantines. Khalid then “moved southwards toward Damascus” and launched an attack against a Byzantine force at Marj Rahit, which was repulsed, but the movement of his army forced the Byzantines to evacuate a critical defensive position near the town of Deraa on the Yarmuk river.<sup>87</sup>

### Yarmuk

The Muslim forces in Syria began to have a telling effect. The local Arabs began to convert and actively aid the Muslims in there raids and attacks. The attacks continued to become more brazen under the leadership of Khalid. Finally, Heraclius ordered a force out of Caesarea to envelop and destroy the army of Amr ibn al Aasi which was currently in Beersheba.<sup>88</sup> Khalid again took his army across the desert and destroyed the Byzantine force at the battle of Ajnadain, in July 634, before it could reach Beersheba.

Following Ajnadain, the Byzantine army concentrated on defending the Deraa gap near the Yarmuk river since any invasion of northern Syria would have to come through that gap (see figure ).<sup>89</sup> The Muslim forces and Byzantine forces fought several battles for this terrain but all were inconclusive. Khalid concentrated his efforts here and finally pushed the Byzantines back. On the day he was finally successful, he received news of the death of Abu Bekr in August of 634. The new caliph, Umar had Khalid replaced by Abu Abaida, a man more known for piety and loyalty than Khalid.



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Figure 5. Syria and the Deraa Gap

*Source:* Glubb, John. *The Great Arab Conquests*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. 1963.

With the Deraa gap open, the Muslim forces moved north and besieged Damascus. Khalid was ordered to take command of the four armies besieging the city by Abu Abaida. Khalid began negotiations with the disaffected monophysite bishop of the city. The bishop made arrangements to open a gate for the Muslims who poured in and began attacking the garrison. The city quickly sued for peace.

After the fall of Damascus, the Muslims laid siege to Jerusalem while Heraclius moved his headquarters to Antioch. The Muslims controlled all of Syria except the coastal cities of Tyre, Sidon, Beriut and Tripoli and the great city of Caesarea. Heraclius organized a new army to come drive the Muslims out of Syria. Two thirds of this new Byzantine army was made up of Ghassinid Arabs and Armenians.<sup>90</sup> The Armenians seem to have been a completely independent force operating in conjunction but not under command of the Byzantine general.<sup>91</sup> The other third of the force was Byzantine peasants from Asia Minor. As soon as this force took the field in 636, the Arabs abandoned all of their conquests of the last 12 months, including Damascus to avoid the risk of forces being isolated and picked off by the superior Byzantine army.<sup>92</sup> Both armies moved, inevitably, back toward the Deraa gap.

The armies collided just north of Deraa on a four mile wide plain between a lava field and the chasm of the Yarmuk river (see figure). The armies faced each other across part of the chasm for four months. This stalemate was grating for the Byzantine side as the Arabs faced them “across the river chasm...prevented their using the heavy cavalry effectively.”<sup>93</sup> The chasm did not inhibit Muslim archery though, which harassed the Byzantine lines incessantly.<sup>94</sup> The whole situation was made worse by friction between the Armenians and the Byzantines. The Ghassanids were completely passive toward

their fellow Arabs and the Armenians seem to have refused to follow Byzantine lead in any action. Meanwhile, Abu Abaida let Khalid take operational control of the Muslim forces at Yarmuk.

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Figure 6. Battle of Yarmuk

*Source:* Glubb, John. *The Great Arab Conquests*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. 1963.

The battle started on 20 July 636 with a dust storm blowing into the faces of the Byzantine line. During the night, the Muslims had seized the only bridge crossing the Wadi al Ruqqd, behind the Byzantine line and the only route out of the plain.<sup>95</sup> The Arabs attacked. It is unclear exactly what transpired, and almost every account says

something different. There are accounts of the Ghassanids retreating from the fight and of the Armenians refusing commands but fighting bravely. Most accounts are contradictory as is analysis by modern writers. One thing is clear, by the next morning, the Byzantine army had ceased to exist.

### The cities

After Yarmuk, “the ability of the Byzantines to offer coordinated resistance to the Muslims virtually collapsed.”<sup>96</sup> Emperor Heraclius withdrew his few remaining field forces across the Taurus mountains. Without the threat of a major confrontation with a Byzantine army, the Muslims “separated into smaller forces that were active in different localities at the same time.”<sup>97</sup>

Abu Abaida seized Hims and made the town the headquarters for the Muslims.<sup>98</sup> Khalid bin al-Walid was sent to “reduce Chalcis and Aleppo.” Amr bin al-As made treaties with Antioch, Cyrrhus, Manbij and other places.<sup>99</sup>

The Muslims now used their de-facto control of the country-side to intimidate their opponents while using the promise of good treatment to encourage cities to capitulate. The “Muslims often tried to by-pass the enemy military commanders” since it was believed the professional military commanders were more loyal to Heraclius.<sup>100</sup> “They wanted to encourage breakaway local officials and populations, who were willing to sever ties with the former imperial authority and now switch over to recognize the authority of the Muslims, although not necessarily convert Islam.”<sup>101</sup> On the whole it was a very sensible strategy. After all, “towns in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt had negotiated terms with commanders of invading Zoroastrian Sassanian armies.”

<sup>102</sup> There was no reason to be surprised that the leaders of a number of towns again

negotiated terms for surrender of their towns to the invading Muslims.

After the collapse of northern Syria, Abu Abaida returned south to “invest Jerusalem.”<sup>103</sup> The Muslims quickly mopped up the towns in the interior, “the imperial government had striven to prevent private individuals from possessing arms, for the sake of public order and the avoidance of the creation of virtual private armies by large land owners.”<sup>104</sup> This policy “prevented individuals from possessing the weapons and the experience with weapons that might have encouraged them to try violent resistance of their own against the Muslims.”<sup>105</sup>

The coastal cities were another issue. They remained defiantly Byzantine and the Arabs deliberately campaigned against each of them. It was often a considerable time before the towns could be conquered definitively.<sup>106</sup> This difficulty was a result of the powerful Byzantine fleet that still ruled the Mediterranean. The Byzantines could maintain contact by sea, “allowing them to raid and reestablish their lost authority” despite Muslim garrisons in the littorals.<sup>107</sup> Caesarea, falling in 641, held against the Muslim siege for seven years and her “long resistance was made possible by regular Byzantine supplies reaching it by sea”<sup>108</sup>. The city of Tripoli resisted until 644 for similar reasons.<sup>109 110</sup>

### Taurus Mountains

The retreat from Syria was a brutal blow to the Empire that had just fought almost fifty years to maintain control of the Holy Land. The utter destruction of three armies in as many years by an enemy would cause most nations to sue for peace. Instead, the Byzantines prepared for a long war.

The Emperor set the example as he retreated over the Taurus Mountains, he

“consciously devastated the border areas along the southern approaches to the Taurus mountains in 637-41.”<sup>111</sup> His plan was to make an invasion of Asia Minor painful for the Arabs. He “created a no-man’s land of destruction and emptiness as part of his defense-in-depth against the Arabs.”<sup>112</sup> He was ruthless in his determination to protect the remainder of the Empire. Thousands of acres of farms were burned and entire village populations were relocated to Anatolia. Heraclius ordered the destruction of the town of Malya for attempting to negotiate independently with the Arabs.<sup>113</sup> It was absolutely necessary to control the passes through the mountains and the Empire could not afford more betrayals like Damascus or Yarmuk.

The Byzantines were experts at this kind of war with the “long traditions of Roman and Byzantine border wars with the Persians, ways of cutting off roads and defending heights, were more relevant than much of the earlier experience with the Arabs, which did not involve mountain warfare.”<sup>114</sup>

The campaigns became much less dramatic. The Arabs “were not successful in devising effective answers to the Byzantine creation of a defense in depth of the mountain passes.”<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, the Muslims now “penetrated areas where there was no longer any Arab population with whom they might hope to make special arrangements and from whom they might receive special cooperation and guidance against the Byzantines.”<sup>116</sup> The Arabs became frustrated with the slow progress and Umar ordered the destruction of Arabissos “because of its inhabitants refusal to give information on the Byzantines to the Muslims.”<sup>117</sup> In short, the Arabs were out of their element in this new kind of warfare.

The Muslims had succeeded in consolidating all the Arabs under the wing of

Islam. They fought one of the most brilliant campaigns in history against two great empires simultaneously and won. The Arab forces in Persia seized Ctesiphon in 636, the same year as the Battle of Yarmuk, the last Sassanid emperor became a refugee and was slain by thieves in 651. The Arabs seized Egypt in 645, leaving the North African coast open to further invasion. The entire Middle East was under Muslim sway. The war was a disaster for Byzantium, mitigated only by the fact that the Empire survived. The Byzantine army learned to respect their Arab adversaries, but much to the chagrin of the Arabs, the Empire did not capitulate and the war would continue across the mountain passes for generations.

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<sup>1</sup> Donner, p100.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> John Glubb, *The Great Arab Conquests* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), p65.

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p173.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p175.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p173.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p175.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p176.

<sup>9</sup> Glubb, p65.

<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, p177.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ann Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse* (Dover NH: Pheonix Mill, 1994) p46.

- <sup>14</sup> Glubb, p65.
- <sup>15</sup> Kennedy, p169.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p171.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p184.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p185.
- <sup>19</sup> John Haldon *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World 565-1204*. (London: UCL Press, 1999), p215.
- <sup>20</sup> Glubb, p142.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p142.
- <sup>22</sup> Kennedy, p177.
- <sup>23</sup> Hyland, p19.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p46.
- <sup>25</sup> Hyland, p46.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p46.
- <sup>27</sup> Hoyland, p241.
- <sup>28</sup> Kennedy, p59.
- <sup>29</sup> Hoyland, p99.
- <sup>30</sup> Arkam, p465.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p466.
- <sup>32</sup> Glubb, p132.
- <sup>33</sup> Kennedy, p21.
- <sup>34</sup> Donner, p223.
- <sup>35</sup> Kennedy, p4.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p4.
- <sup>37</sup> Donner, p222.



- <sup>38</sup> Glubb, p142.
- <sup>39</sup> Hoyland, p79.
- <sup>40</sup> Glubb, p114.
- <sup>41</sup> Kennedy, p175.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p176.
- <sup>43</sup> Donner p223.
- <sup>44</sup> Baynes and Moss, p304.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p304.
- <sup>46</sup> Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society* p112.
- <sup>47</sup> Maurice, *Strategikon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984)  
p137.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, p139.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid, p139.
- <sup>50</sup> Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society* p217.
- <sup>51</sup> Maurice p139.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., p139.
- <sup>53</sup> John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge  
University Press, 1990) p210
- <sup>54</sup> Maurice, p11.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., p12.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., p13.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p14.
- <sup>58</sup> Treadgold, *Byzantium and its army, 284-1081.*( Stanford, Calif.: Stanford  
University Press, 1995),  
p17.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., p63.

- <sup>60</sup> Ibid, p66.
- <sup>61</sup> Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, p135.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., p137.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., p136.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., p138.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Dennis, 1985. *Three Byzantine military treatises*. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985) p139.
- <sup>68</sup> Maurice, p87.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., p62.
- <sup>70</sup> Donner, p101.
- <sup>71</sup> Glubb, p92.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., p92.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p93.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., p129.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>78</sup> Donner, p115.
- <sup>79</sup> Glubb, p132.
- <sup>80</sup> Donner, p115.
- <sup>81</sup> Glubb p132.
- <sup>82</sup> Donner, p116.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid.,

- <sup>84</sup> Ibid., p117.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid., p118.
- <sup>86</sup> Glubb p 132.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid., p134.
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid., p146.
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid., p150.
- <sup>90</sup> Hyland p47.
- <sup>91</sup> Glubb, p173.
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid., p174.
- <sup>93</sup> Hyland p47.
- <sup>94</sup> Ibid., p178.
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>96</sup> Donner, p149.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid, p149.
- <sup>98</sup> Ibid., p147.
- <sup>99</sup> Ibid., p149.
- <sup>100</sup> Walter Kaegi . *Byzantium and the early Islamic conquests.*( Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p239.
- <sup>101</sup> Ibid., p239.
- <sup>102</sup> Ibid., p266.
- <sup>103</sup> Donner, p151.
- <sup>104</sup> Kaegi, p260.
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid., p260.
- <sup>106</sup> Donner, p154.
- <sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Kaegi, p269.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p237.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p238.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p242.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p243.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p244.

## CHAPTER 5

### AFTERMATH

#### Stalemate

After the depopulation of the Taurus frontier, the warfare between the Byzantines and the Arabs was reduced to raiding. The Arabs mounted expeditions into Anatolia almost every year for the next century, and besieged Constantinople on at least 6 different occasions. The Byzantines resisted and eventually drove off every incursion. The conflict became almost ritualistic for both sides. The Arabs concentrated their efforts in Africa and India, conquering huge and wealthy territories. In 750, the Byzantines were secure enough to begin offensive operations in Bulgaria and Armenia.<sup>1</sup> Both the Arabs and the Byzantines were content to allow the Taurus line to become a stalemate, trying to change the strategic situation on that front was simply too dangerous and costly for either side.

The Byzantine army was able to hold the Taurus frontier and repel all incursions until the sack of Constantinople by Christian crusaders in 1204, nearly six centuries after the battle of Yarmuk. They were one of the most capable forces in history on the defense. The long-term effectiveness of their defense begs the question: Why did the Byzantine defense of Syria fail?

#### Failure in Syria

As discussed in the previous chapters, there were many factors increasing Arab

power and just as many factors diminishing Byzantine power during the campaigns of the 630's. Religious fervor is frequently cited in Islamic sources as the primary factor, but battlefield prowess, subterfuge, military genius, economic weakness and diplomatic blunders all played a greater part than religion in the campaigns. The most important factor contributing to the collapse of the Byzantine defense was social change in Syria.

### Religious Fervor

The religious fervor of the early Muslim warriors is frequently cited as the greatest component of the victories in Syria.<sup>2</sup> The courage and ferocity of Muslim warriors cannot be doubted as they faced off against vastly superior forces in both Syria and Mesopotamia. But attributing this to religious conviction does not fit with the reality of 6<sup>th</sup> century Syria.

While religious fervor was certainly prevalent in the Arab armies, it was not universal. Their greatest general, Khalid ibn-al Waleed was at best a half-hearted convert, who contravened religious practices with an ostentatious life-style and a resistance to religious authority that led to his removal from command after his greatest victory.<sup>3</sup> Many of the common soldiers were not true believers either, numerous tribes had to be subjugated by force of arms after Muhammad's death and their subsequent apostasy.

On the other side of the coin, Byzantine religious conviction further diminishes the validity of religion being the crucial factor in the collapse of the defense. While it is true that Christianity was not homogenous in the Empire, the fervor of the populations cannot be ignored. When the Sassanid Persians seized the True Cross, the Byzantine armies fought a brutal multi-year campaign deep within enemy territory to recover the

relic. Heraclius gained much of his legitimacy as Emperor from his blessing by the Patriarch of Constantinople and bishops were generally the most important leaders in the cities of Syria.<sup>4</sup> Religion was just as important in Byzantium as Arabia.

### Battlefield Prowess

As discussed in the previous chapters, the Muslim armies displayed incredible prowess on the battlefield, but this was not the decisive factor in the collapse of the defense of Syria. Both sides used essentially the same types of weapons; straight swords and spears. The individual soldiers were also similarly experienced in combat, assuming a lifetime of blood feuds in Arabia would give similar experience to a thirty-year war against the Sassanid Persians.

Even the significant differences between the sides should not have been decisive. The Byzantine cavalry was the most proficient in the world, and the courage displayed by the Byzantine forces during the war with the Sassanid Empire cannot be assumed to have disappeared during the Syrian campaign. Arab archery was superb and used to great effect at Yarmuk, but was useless against fortified cities. Battlefield prowess, while undoubtedly important, was not the decisive factor.

### Subterfuge and Betrayal

Many sources emphasize the importance of subterfuge and betrayal as critical factors in the collapse of the Byzantine defense of Syria.<sup>5</sup> Again, while they were certainly issues that the commanders had to address, betrayal and subterfuge were not the most important reason for the Byzantine loss.

The Arabs were justifiably proud of their ability to subvert key people in cities to open gates or outright surrender the town. They also enticed field armies of Byzantine-Arab auxiliaries to inaction, making Byzantine success more difficult. The Byzantine forces also faced problems with other auxiliaries, as seen with the Armenians at Yarmuk (see chapter 4).

On the other hand, the Byzantines had a long history of using subterfuge in war at both the strategic and tactical levels. This was such an important part of Byzantine military culture that there is a whole chapter of doctrine in the *Strategikon* devoted to methods of using subterfuge to defeat enemies.<sup>6</sup> It details such things as using false embassies, infiltrating enemy cities, and several other techniques used by the Arabs during the war. It is impossible that these techniques were a surprise to the Byzantines, and subterfuge was not the major reason for the failure of their defense.

### Military Genius

Military genius at both strategic and tactical levels is necessary to conquer vast swaths of civilization like the Arabs achieved in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. But, again, military genius does not explain why the Byzantine defense failed in Syria.

The Muslims certainly had a truly great tactical genius in Khalid ibn al-Waleed. His determined and creative personality saved the Muslim army from disaster at Mu'ta. He developed the technique of camelback desert maneuver that would perplex numerous foes. Most importantly, Khalid orchestrated a victory at Yarmuk that is similar to Hannibal's at Cannae in brilliance and scale, but with longer lasting effects. Despite this, he was removed from command before the conquest was complete.



On the Byzantine side, Heraclius was undoubtedly a strategic genius. He led an amphibious rebellion against Phokas from modern day Libya. He then launched an invasion of Persia that anticipates Macarthur's amphibious turning movement at Inchon by a millennia, which he then used to destroy the Persian menace once and for all. Finally, it was his fertile mind that developed the defense in depth along the Taurus Mountains that would eventually stem the hemorrhage of Byzantine territory and hold the Arabs a bay for centuries.

In effect, both sides had military genius at their aid during the war in Syria. While Khalid's brilliant battlefield command was probably necessary to conquer Syria, it was not the most important factor in the failure of the Byzantine defense.

### Economic Weakness

Economic weakness is frequently a contributing factor to the decline of great nations. This was certainly the case for the Byzantine Empire in Syria. Thirty years of war in Persia had devastated the economy, but again it was not the decisive factor.

The Byzantine economy was a wreck after the victory over the Sassanid Persians. Phokas had notoriously misspent imperial funds and the enemy had occupied most of the wealthy territories for the entire war. Syria was in shambles, farms in Anatolia had lain fallow for decades and entire regions had been plundered to feed the Persian war machine. All the while, armies had to be maintained and bribes to allies and auxiliaries had to be paid. The Empire was broke on the eve of the war with the Arabs.

The Arabs, however, were not better off economically than the Byzantines. After the collapse of the frankincense economy, the big Arabs kingdoms were economically

devastated. As discussed earlier, breach of the Marib dam had destroyed what economy still existed in Southern Arabia. The Arabs began the war with even fewer economic resources than the war-ravaged Byzantine Empire. Therefore, economic weakness was certainly not the major factor in the failure of the defense of Syria.

### Diplomatic Blunders

With the multi-generation war against the Sassanid Persians, the Byzantines had become very focused their own national survival. This combined with economic hardship after the war led the Byzantines to make some awful diplomatic blunders, especially the canceling of the subsidy to the Ghassanid Arabs and the alienation of the Armenian auxiliaries. As grave as these blunders were, they should not have been critical in defense of Syria.

The Ghassinids and the Armenians were both long-standing allies of the Byzantines, with relationships spanning centuries. Both groups had been supported throughout the war with the Sassanids and had fought bravely despite the fact that Constantinople itself was besieged for most of the war. They were both reliable allies, who the Byzantines could reasonably have expected to stay allies despite a diplomatic gaffe. Even in the face of a blunder, it should have been easy for the Emperor to recover their long-standing allegiance. Diplomatic blunders were definitely a contributing factor to the failure of the defense in Syria, but should have been recoverable if there were not other, more important factors.

## Social Change

The most important factor contributing to the failure of the Byzantine defense of Syria was the vast social changes, which had taken place in Syria and Arabia before the war. These changes and their consequences support many of the other factors and became a dynamic and unanticipated force, which the might of the Byzantine Empire could not resist.

The first major social factor was the decades of Sassanid rule in Syria. Syria had always been a restive region, with insurrections being fought all the way back to Augustus's time as Emperor, but the legions had always maintained a façade of invulnerability, which protected and preserved the Imperial rule. Thirty years of Persian occupation had shattered that façade. The Sassanids, focused on fighting the war, had largely left the cities of Syria to rule themselves for a whole generation. The Empire was no longer seen as a necessary part of life.

At the same time, the populations of Syria were beginning to think of themselves as a separate entity from the Empire, the Arabs had coalesced into a single people. The trek of the southern tribes northward after the Marib dam disaster spread a uniform culture across Arabia. Muhammad used this base to forge a nation by incorporating old religious practice into a unifying monotheistic religious and political government. The Arabs were a young and confident nation.

The Byzantines aggravated the situation by persecuting the Monophysite Christians in Syria. The religious leaders of the Empire saw the Monophysite/Orthodox split as a dangerous division in the Empire and wanted to unify all the people under one religion, but the approach was suppression rather than reconciliation. As a result the

Syrians, largely Monophysites, resisted. When the Arabs arrived with a doctrine which permitted other religions “of the Book” to practice without persecution so long as they paid a tax, the Syrians saw this as preferable to persecution by other Christians.

These social forces proved insurmountable to the Byzantines. The alienation of the Syrian people made the defense untenable. In effect, Syria had become a foreign country. Cities, which resisted Persian sieges for years, capitulated without a fight. Ancient allies refused to help or even provided intelligence to the enemy. Minor diplomatic blunders were magnified in the eyes of the Syrian people. Armies could no longer be raised locally by the Emperor to replace armies defeated in battle. The Byzantine defense crumbled in the face of the disdain of the Syrian people. Emperor Heraclius wisely withdrew and formed a dead zone between the remainder of the Empire and the diseased provinces, which risked infecting the entire country.

#### “Shadowing War”

The defense in depth that Heraclius set up on the Taurus Mountains led to the evolution of the “Shadowing War”. The Byzantine frontier forces would fight a low intensity guerilla campaign while following the Arab armies across Anatolia and the local forces would burn crops and remove populations to make the land hostile to the invader. Once the Arab columns could no longer sustain themselves in the field, the Byzantine army would attack and harass them until they retreated back over the mountains.

The Byzantine resilience beyond the Taurus and the continued success of the shadowing war was a shock to the Arabs. The Arabs continued to run roughshod over other enemies, conquering all of North Africa, occupying Sicily and Spain and even

invading France, but they were stymied on the Byzantine front. Over the decades, the raids into Anatolia became first ritualistic and eventually non-existent, they were simply not worth the cost in men and material to the Arabs. The Arabs never developed a counter strategy to the Byzantine tactics.

The Arabs did learn lessons from the Byzantine shadowing war, which they continue to use today. The deliberate avoidance of decisive combat, destruction of anything worthwhile to the enemy, use of local populace as intelligence gatherers and guerilla forces are all tactics with which the Byzantines punished Arab invaders in Anatolia. They let the Arabs exhaust themselves in the Taurus Mountains and against the walls of Byzantine cities in what is one of the longest successful defensive campaigns in history. It would take another Muslim empire, the Turks, rising up from the Anatolian heartland to bring Byzantium to its knees in 1453.

### Echoes of 636

The conquest of Syria by the Arabs in the 630's was the defining moment in their history. There is absolutely no parallel in Western history for how crucial this period was for Islamic culture. In many ways we are still hearing echoes of 636.

The Arabs launched a spree of conquests, which outstrip most others in history in speed and scope. Their empire was as large as Alexander's or Napoleon's and built in roughly the same amount of time, but it lasted centuries compared to the rapid collapse of the Macedonian or French empires. They built a culture based on this conquest, which was the most advanced in the world. Arab scholars translated ancient scripts, Arab architects built glittering cities and palaces, Arab mathematicians developed algebra and

the numeral system used throughout the West today. The Arabs are justifiably proud of this heritage.

Their pride in this heritage continues to have a huge impact on modern Arab thought and culture. The Koran and Haditha were written during this time and still dominate theological discussions throughout Arabia. The religious and cultural practices of the seventh century have seen a philosophical revival in the Wahhabi movement, which dominates much of Arabia today.<sup>7</sup>

This pride carries over to the way the Arabs fight. The Arabians of the Syrian invasion were “extremely war-like, but their methods of fighting were primitive”.<sup>8</sup> Arabs are proud of this primitiveness and it’s success against the Byzantines and continue to emulate it today, focusing on “personal bravery, to the neglect of skill”<sup>9</sup> as can be seen today in Iraq or Palestine with brave suicide bombers attacking sophisticated, skillful enemies.

Finally, the most telling echo from 636 is that of fighting in a country where the populace is hostile. The Byzantine defense of Syria was in many ways an invasion; the Empire was no longer a welcome ruler. When the Arabs offered an alternative, the people aided them. Later, the Arabs had this very dynamic turned against them in the Taurus Mountains, with similar results. The Arabs learned well the lessons of confronting a hostile population and have used those lessons against numerous invaders, most famously the Turks in the early 1900s, the Israelis in the 1980’s and the United States in Iraq today.

Arabs are still taught about the battles and the achievements of the conquests of the seventh century. Modern Muslim military commanders write books analyzing the

campaigns. They look back to the traditions and culture that gave them those glories. Many long for a new Caliph, such as Abu Bekr or Umar who can unite the Arab people and act as Muhammad's successor and return glory to the Arab people. It is this dream of lost glory, which drives many of America's enemies in Arabia today, particularly Al Qaeda.<sup>10</sup>

The huge social changes in Arabia and Syria prior to the Arab-Byzantine war are not unique in history. Enormous changes in economic situation, mass movements of populations and marginalized people can be seen all across the world. Focusing on the same geographic area, possible parallels are numerous. The economic explosion of the Arab oil industry is not unlike the frankincense economy. The mass movement of Palestinians from Israel may have some parallels with the Arab trek across the deserts after the Marib dam collapsed. The Kurds are a people without a land, subject to foreign rulers who do not value their traditions, somewhat like the Monophysite Christians in Syria. How different is sectarian killing in Iraq or an *Intifada* in Palestine from an old Arab blood feud? Perhaps the most troubling aspect of this is the American perception of this being old news and somewhat irrelevant. Most of this has happened in less than two generations, we may be as blind to social change as the Byzantines.<sup>11</sup>

It puts the United States at a significant disadvantage in our dealings with Arabia that we seem to be deaf to the echoes of 636 AD. An informal survey of a dozen U. S. Army majors at the Command and General Staff College revealed that none had even heard of the battle of Yarmuk, much less Caliph Umar or Khalid ibn al-Walid. The greatest ruler and greatest general of the people who are currently America's greatest strategic challenge are a complete enigma to the American officer corps. Perhaps the

Byzantines are not the only empire to suffer at the hands of the Arabs.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Haldon, *Byzantium at war, AD 600-1453*. (New York: Routledge, 1983), p20.

<sup>2</sup> Arkham, p26

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p40.

<sup>4</sup> Kaegi, p76.

<sup>5</sup> John Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries*. (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p306.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice, p93.

<sup>7</sup> John L. Esposito *Islam : The Straight Path*.(New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p118.

<sup>8</sup> Glubb, p369.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p369.

<sup>10</sup> Esposito, p259.



## GLOSSARY

*Cataphract* or *Kataphrakroi*. Byzantine professional soldier, the heavy cavalry successor to the Roman Legionaire. These were career soldiers and extremely expensive to maintain, so they were typically used as a deployable reserve to move to trouble spots around the Empire.

*Caliph*. Successor to the prophet, the religious, military and political leader of the Muslim Empire.

*Frankincense*. Aromatic sap from a tree found exclusively in Southern Arabia and Yemen which was used extensively in ancient times for religious and sanitary purposes. Was the basis of an extraordinary merchant economy in Arabia which collapsed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD with the rise of Christianity and the prohibitions against many pagan rituals.

*Sayf*. Style of sword used by most Arabs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. A long, straight sword usually imported from Yemen or India

*Theme*. Unit of administration for Byzantine territory, similar to a modern state or province. A Theme provided its own local militia and border patrols and would levy troops to support the Imperial Army when operating nearby. Thematic troops were not normally deployed far from their home territory.

## APPENDIX A

### CHRONOLOGY

306-Roman Emperor Constantine makes Constantinople the new capitol of the empire, beginning the Byzantine Empire

476-Rome falls

570-Mohammad is born near Mecca

581-Byzantine Emperor Justin abolishes dynastic title of Ghassinid Arabs

582-Maurice becomes Byzantine Emperor

592-Maurice assists Chosroes to become Emperor of Sassanian Persia

602-Phokas becomes Byzantine Emperor by marching army into Constantinople

602-Emperor Chosroes of Persia invades Byzantine Empire to reinstate Maurice

610-Heraclius proclaimed Emperor

622-Mohammad fleas to Medina/Heraclius makes amphibious penetration to outflank Persian field armies

625-Battle of Uhud

628-Heraclius completes conquest of Persia, sets up puppet government

630-Muslims capture Mecca from Querish tribe/Heraclius cancels subsidy to Ghassind Arabs.

632-Mohammad dies/Abu Bekr becomes Caliph

632-Campaigns to stop apostasy/preliminary invasion of Persia and Palestine

634-Umar become Caliph/Khalid's march from Persia to Syria across the desert

636-Battle of Yarmuk/Arabs conquer Persia

640-Establishment of Taurus defense line/Arabs invade Egypt

641-Heraclius dies

642-Arabs capture Alexandria

644-Caliph Umar Assasinated

1453-Turks capture Constantinople, ending Byzantine Empire

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