

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”.¹ 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 armies². 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 fronts³. 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 7th century when a prophet from the desert declared war on the most powerful empire in Christendom.

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

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

³ 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.

