

Relationship between the Byzantine-Christians and Arab-
Muslims in the Middle Ages.

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1. Thesis/Hypothesis

In this study, we propose that the relationship between the Byzantine-Christians and the Arab-Muslims was of little significance to either nation. Through the course of this study we will put forth evidence that goes towards falsifying this claim.

2. Sources/Limitations of Study

a) Primary and Secondary

The primary sources we have considered have been minimal and consist entirely of Arabic-Islamic sources. Byzantine-Christian primary sources are rare and difficult to find. (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/byzantium/index.html>). Those primary sources that are Arabic-Islamic in origin were found in secondary sources, and most are textual accounts of military expeditions, or come from the Qur'an, the Islamic sacred text. We also found an image of two Arab-Byzantine gold coins which we present as a primary source.

The secondary sources we have considered examine the relationship between the Arab-Muslims and the Byzantine-Christians from both perspectives. We have looked at six sources in depth, all of which are listed in our sources at the end of this paper, and we have tried to find a cross-range of perspectives on the relationship between the Arab-Muslims and the Byzantine-Christians through these sources. These sources were taken from books, journals, and internet websites.

b) Perspectives

As Nadia Maria El Cheikh writes in her book, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, “texts do not simply exist as a pre-linguistic reality that language faithfully describes. Rather, reading is “always already” situated in or shaped by textual processes... Since no writings took place in the

abstract, the representations were dependent on traditions and orthodoxy” (2004: 5-6). El Cheikh is here highlighting one of the main issues facing historians of all kinds; history is always told from certain perspectives and historical accounts must be understood in this way. El Cheikh discusses the limitations of her sources by saying that “the texts examined in this book belonged to the literature of the elite” (12). As such, the knowledge gained through these primary texts can only truly represent the positions of the elite during this period. Furthermore, many of her primary sources (which we also refer to here) are from religious texts and accounts, which she describes in the following way.

Traditional Arabic-Islamic sources are not contemporaneous with the events they purport to relate and sometimes were written centuries later. These sources contain internal complexities, anachronisms, discrepancies, and contradictions. Moreover, many provide evidence of embellishment and invention that were introduced to serve the purposes of political or religious apologetic. (5)

So, these religious texts were often written to serve a particular purpose and to put forth a particular perspective. These sources are primarily proponents of the religious perspective over the historically accurate perspective. However, El Cheikh goes on to say that her study is not so much concerned with confirming or denying the accuracy of the historical data presented, but instead is meant to show how the Arabic-Islamic sources contributed to the discourse on Byzantium (ibid). As such, she views the “events” as less important than the “perspective on the events,” which in themselves lend to a certain understanding of the relationship between the two parties. Even so, the perspective predominantly shown from the Arabic-Islamic side is that of the religious or military elite, and the same goes for the Byzantine-Christian sources. Furthermore, the interpretation of the primary sources (religious and military texts, and coins)

depends largely on the perspective of the historian who is interpreting these artifacts, and whether they are Byzantium historians or Arab historians.

c) Awareness of perspectives not taken

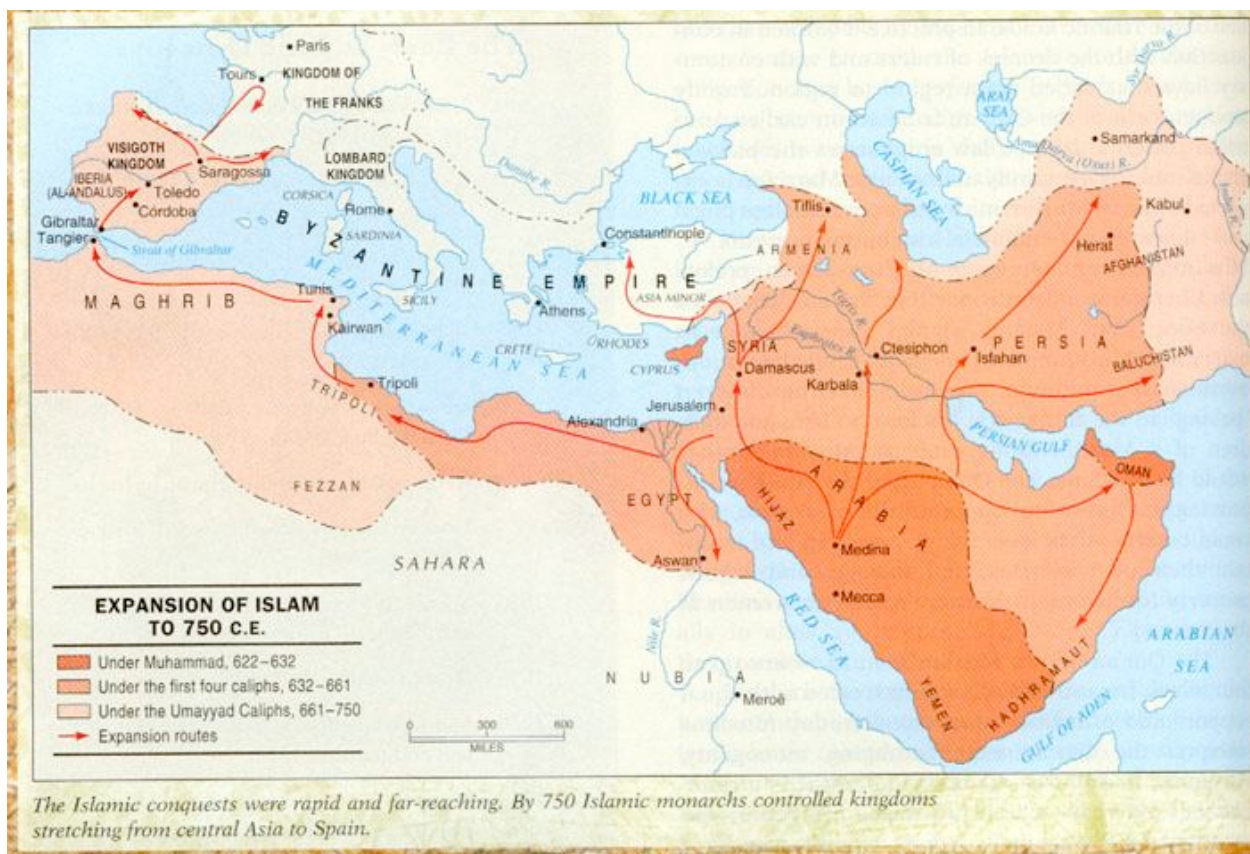
There are many perspectives left out of this study, the most significant being those who were not part of the elite class, as was mentioned above. Furthermore, while the Islamic men's view on Byzantine women is discussed in El Cheikh's book, the perspective of women from either empire is completely absent (123-128). Because it was the elite perspectives that were recorded, we might assume that women did not hold such positions in both the Byzantine and the Islamic empires. This, however, is an argument to be explored further in a different paper. Here, our argument is that the relationship between the Byzantine-Christians and Arab-Muslims was of little significance to either nation. In the following discussion we will provide evidence towards falsifying this claim.

3. Argument/Discussion/Evidence

From the sources we have surveyed, it is apparent that the Muslim-Byzantine relationship, while suffering from major gaps in its historiography, was anything but insignificant (El Cheikh, 2001:53). As A.A. Vasiliev wrote,

The history of Islam in the time of Muhammad is obscure and debatable because of the present condition of sources bearing upon this period. And yet for the history of the Byzantine Empire during the seventh century this problem is of extreme significance, since its adequate solution may affect greatly the explanation of the unusual and rapid military success of the Arabs, who took from the Byzantine Empire its eastern and southern provinces: Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa. (1958: 155)

According to Vasiliev, the history of Islam is of great importance to the history of the Byzantine Empire, since it was during the era of the prophet Muhammad that the Arabs expanded militarily and conquered the eastern and southern provinces of the Byzantine Empire. According to Vasiliev, then, the origin of Islam and the expansion of Arabia into what was previously Byzantine territory are not coincidental. These two historical phenomena are related and, as such, the history of Islam is related to, and has significance for, the way Byzantium progressed (or declined). The following image is a visual depiction of the expansion of Islam during the seventh and eighth century. This map also shows where Arabia was geographically in relation to Byzantium.



(<http://www.ata.boun.edu.tr/Faculty/Nadir%20Ozbek/courses/Hist121/Maps/Exansion%20of%20Islam%20750.jpg>)

Historians from both sides (Arabia and Byzantium) write about the significance of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius to the Arab nation. The reason why the emperor Heraclius was of such significance, according to El Cheikh, is because “he was contemporaneous with the Prophet Muhammad and was the leader of the reconsolidated Byzantine Empire during the first wave of Islamic conquests” (2004: 39). El Cheikh quotes Al-Tabari as a primary source of the Arabian view of Heraclius’ accession to power.

The Rum [Romans] killed Emperor Phocas because of what they saw of his immorality, his insolence toward God, and his bad administration. They replaced him with a man named Heraclius, who, seeing the extent of the destruction afflicted by the Persian soldiers and the number of prisoners and booty they took, ... cried and implored God to save him and save his people from the Persian soldiers. (39-40)

The Arabs, according to this source, viewed the new Emperor Heraclius as a man with greater moral conviction and reverence to God than his predecessor, Phocas. “But,” writes El Cheikh, “although this emphasis on the godliness of Heraclius is significant, perhaps more important still is his reputed familiarity with the Qur’an” (41). Indeed, Muslim historians write about written correspondence between Muhammad and Heraclius during the seventh century, whereby Heraclius is said by some to have responded to Muhammad’s summons for him to embrace Islam. She quotes Abu Sufyan’s version of Heraclius’ response:

To Ahmad, the messenger of God, announced by Jesus, from Caesar, king of the Rum [Romans]. I have received your letter with your ambassador, and I testify that you are the messenger of God found in our New Testament. Jesus, son of Mary, announced you. I did ask the Rum to believe in you, but they refused. Had they

obeyed, it would have been better for them. I wish I were with you to serve you and wash your feet. (45)

In this version of Heraclius' response to Muhammad, Heraclius acknowledges the status of Muhammad as a prophet (messenger of God), but says that the Rum (Romans/Byzantines) refused to believe and therefore he could not convert himself to Islam. This statement is of immense value to the Muslim community as it confirms Muhammad's status and sets Islam apart as a distinct religious community (53).

However, as was cited earlier in our discussion of the source limitations, the accuracy of the Islamic texts are highly debatable, having been written centuries after the actual events described would have occurred, and many argue that these texts support the proliferation of the Muslim religion over the development of historically accurate knowledge. This interaction between the prophet Muhammad and the emperor Heraclius would be just such an example of a debatable occurrence. Indeed, Vasiliev wrote the following on the matter. "That Muhammad wrote to the rulers of other lands, including Heraclius, proposing that they accept Islam, and that Heraclius responded favourably, is now recognized as a later invention without historical foundation" (1958: 160). This being so, what the Muslim version does highlight is the significance of the Byzantines to the Islamic Arabs, since one could argue that they would not propose or emphasize this relationship had they not admired Byzantium and wanted to lend this prestige to their own religion to profit its expansion. Indeed, the Arabs, according to El Cheikh, respected the Byzantines' skills in craftsmanship and architecture, as well as their organization of state and administration, and adopted many of these practices into their own society (2004: 3, 54). El Cheikh goes on to purport that,

any analysis of various aspects of the Arab-Muslim image of the Byzantine Empire must acknowledge the effect that Byzantium had on developing the Islamic civilization and also the state of perpetual warfare between them... [Also], in a number of profound and unspoken ways, the Muslims' own self-definition was connected with the way in which they related to the Byzantines. (3-4)

So, El Cheikh tells us that Byzantium was intricately tied to the Arab-Muslim image of itself, even going so far as to describe Byzantium as “an imaginary category of difference against which Islam defined itself” (223). This was apparent in the way that the Islamic writers used Heraclius' correspondence with Muhammad as an example of the legitimacy and strength of their religion, as was written about above.

This proclivity the Arab-Muslims had for the Byzantine emperor Heraclius is also evident in the iconic imprint of him and his sons on an Arabian dinar (gold coin) issued during the late seventh century. The image on the following page shows the emperor and his two sons on one of the coins' faces (#6). According to John Walker, this coin was based on a Byzantine prototype and had lost its Christian symbolism, but the image of Heraclius still remained (1955: 15).



VI. GOLD COINS

i. Egyptian; z. Roman; za. Enlargement of (2);
3-5. Merovingian; 6, 7. Arab-Byzantine

Two Arab-Byzantine Dinars Author(s): John Walker Source: The British Museum Quarterly, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Mar., 1955), pp. 15-16 Published by: British Museum Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4422506>

That these coins have the image of Heraclius engraved on them certainly shows a relationship between the Byzantines and the Arabs, and not an insignificant one. However, thus far we have mainly explored this relationship from the Arab-Muslim perspective. Did the Byzantines, too, define themselves in relation to the Arabs? It doesn't exactly seem so. According to Vasiliev,

At first, the Byzantine Empire viewed Islam as... an instance of secession from the true Christian faith similar in nature to other heresies. The Byzantine historians also showed very little interest in the rise of Muhammad and the political movement which he initiated. (1958: 37)

So, initially, it seems, the Arabs were of little significance to the Byzantines, who were more interested in their own happenings than in those of the Arab-Muslims. Indeed, according to some Byzantine historians, the Arab-Muslims were mere “fanatics, burning to carry all over the world by the force of their swords their new war-cry, that “God was One and Muhammad His prophet”” (1892, 159). However, Vasiliev asserts that this view of the religious fanaticism of the Muslims as one of the main causes for their military success with the Byzantine Empire in the seventh century should be recognized as unfounded (1958: 157). Vasiliev goes on to write that “very few of the followers of Muhammad fought in Syria and Persia. The great majority of fighting Arabs consisted of Bedouins who know of Islam only by hearsay. They were concerned with nothing but material, earthly benefits and craved spoils and unrestrained license” (ibid). There is, then, some debate about the causes of Arabian military success, depending on the viewpoint from which one is looking. Furthermore, while some Byzantine historians may write of the Arabs as “fanatics,” one writer at least acknowledges the deep significance the Arab-Muslim conquest had on Byzantium culture:

After the Arab-Muslim conquest of Egypt and Syria, the nature of the state and culture was transformed. Byzantium became much more a Greek state [perhaps best seen in the emperor Heraclius' adoption of the Greek title Basileus], all the cities except Constantinople faded away to small fortified centers, and the military organization of the empire came to be based on a series of local armies. There is then a persistent ambiguity about the beginning of Byzantine history – between the building of Constantinople by Constantine I and the mid-seventh century collapse of late antique urban culture. (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/byzantium/index.html>)

According to this statement, the very point at which we can mark the beginning of Byzantine history, for some, is the point at which the Arabs conquered the Byzantium states of Egypt and Syria. This in itself goes a long way towards displaying the significance the Arabs had for Byzantium society.

4. Relation/Significance for contemporary society or education

In a post-9/11 world, the relationship between modern Middle Eastern Muslims and Western Christians has developed certain significance. The Muslim Taliban, who attacked the United States in 2001, are described by many as “fanatics,” much as the Arab-Muslims of the late seventh century were described by the Byzantines. These Muslims describe their attack on America in terms of a *jihad*, or “holy war on behalf of Islam” (2001: 23). This is also how the Arab conquests of the seventh century are described by some. According to Ruelland, the jihad “is considered by the Muslims as a necessary tool to the cohesion and the expansion of their nation” (2007:41). Since 9/11 there has been much tension between Christians and Muslims in the Western world, with high levels of scepticism being raised about the Islamic religion, as most Westerners do not understand how a religion could promote such violence in the name of God.

According to one Byzantine historian, a similar perspective on jihad or holy war was shared by the Byzantines in the Middle Ages.

For the Byzantines, it must be said at the outset, both ideas and forms of holy war – jihad and crusade – were abhorrent. They absolutely rejected both. First, the jihad. They did not understand it. What motivated the armies of Islam, as the Byzantines saw it, was the hope of booty and a barbaric love of fighting... Byzantine authors, from the seventh to the fourteenth century, repeat these accusations, as they profess their utter repugnance for the doctrine of jihad. In their polemics against Islam they vehemently criticize the jihad as little more than a license for unjustified murder and a pretext for pillaging. And, while the Byzantines, when the opportunity arose, may have indulged in their share of massacre and looting, they did not excuse it in the name of religion. (2001: 33)

So, the Byzantine Christians objected the notion of holy war and did not understand it. The same can be said of Western Christians today. However, what can be learned about this issue from the study of the relationship between the Byzantine-Christians and the Arab-Muslims in the Middle Ages is that one cannot understand a relationship by looking at it only from one perspective. One nation's or culture's perspective on another's may prove to be biased and unfounded when explored more deeply and from a broader point of view. For example, while some historians describe the Arabian conquests of Byzantine territory in the seventh century as a product of the expansion of Islam, others have said that those who fought in these wars knew of Islam only by hearsay and that Muhammad himself was a promoter of peace between nations. This is an important perspective to understand today as some have become prejudiced towards people of the Islamic faith, feeling that all Muslims are "fanatics" and that Islam is a dangerous religion.

However, it is important to understand that the actions of those who decide to take the notion of holy war to the extreme cannot speak for all those of similar faith. As was discussed above, there can be (and are) multiple reasons for waging war against another nation, and religion can be just one of the ways of justifying such attacks. The Christian Crusades have been compared to the notion of Islamic jihad in some texts, and Byzantine historians have noted that the Byzantines not only disagreed with the notion of jihad but were also “hostile to the theological structure of the Crusades” (2007: 75). So, even though they were Christians, they did not agree with what the Crusaders were doing, and the same might be said about many Muslims’ views on the notion of jihad and certainly of the Taliban. This study of the relationship between the Byzantine-Christians and Arab-Muslims brings such issues to light and also shows us the long history of conflict between the East and the West, allowing a valid point of entry into discussions of this issue.

5. Conclusions

We find our initial claim that the relationship between the Byzantine-Christians and the Arab-Muslims was of little significance to either nation as falsified by the evidence discussed above. Therefore, we conclude that the relationship was of significance to both nations.

6. Sources

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