Chapter 1

THE PROBLEM OF BYZANTIUM AND THE EARLY ISLAMIC CONQUESTS

CHALLENGES IN THE SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Roman emperors and Augusti were always of the same opinion, which I am telling you, not only those who stayed in Rome, but also those who stayed in Byzantium [Constantinople], including Constantine the Great, Julian, Jovian, and Theodosius. Sometimes they stayed in the east, and sometimes in the west, but they stayed in Byzantium [Constantinople] very little. At that time all the provinces were tranquil including all of Europe and Africa, and the best part of Asia as far as Euphratesia, and the lands of Adiabene, Armenia, Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, and Egypt, and even the great and much-prized Babylon were subject to the Romans. But from the time great torpor fell on men, rather like an epidemic, nothing good has happened to the Roman Empire.¹

Such was a late eleventh-century Byzantine retrospective diagnosis of the causes for the loss of so many former territories of the Roman Empire. The author, Kekaumenos, simply attributed the downfall of the empire to the proclivity of emperors to avoid leaving the capital for the provinces. This is an inquiry into only a part of the same phenomenon that vexed Kekaumenos: the character and causes of the Byzantine loss of Palestine, Syria, and Byzantine Mesopotamia to the Muslims in the 630s and 640s and the immediate consequences of these developments for the Byzantine Empire, especially Anatolia, for its armies, and for its worldview. The answer, of course, cannot be as easy or tendentious as was that of Kekaumenos, who did not even mention Islam as a possible cause. For some scholars of Islamic history, this subject may appear to be ill conceived, because for them there is no reason why the Muslims should not have defeated and supplanted Byzantium. No adequate Byzantine historical research exists on these

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problems, certainly none that includes the use of untranslated Arabic sources.

The subject of this inquiry is the initial military collapse and subsequent Byzantine search for a viable strategy against the Muslims. With great difficulty and after experimentation with various strategies and tactics, the Byzantines, unlike the Sassanian Persians, finally managed to regroup and began to stabilize a viable military front against the Muslims. The chronological termini are somewhat restricted: most events fall between 628, the date of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius’ peace arrangements with the Sassanians, and the middle of the 640s, when the Muslims had accomplished their conquests not only of Palestine and Syria but also of Egypt and Byzantine Mesopotamia. The broader historical background, of course, includes the history of Roman and early Byzantine relations with the Arabs, the Christological controversies, the conditions, grievances, and perspectives of the non-Greek populations of the above areas as well as Armenia, the economy of the empire, and its wars with Sassanian Persia in the sixth and especially in the early seventh centuries, between 602 and 628.

This study has been given relatively narrow chronological termini in order to attempt an inquiry into the actual Byzantine efforts to defend Palestine, Syria, and Byzantine Mesopotamia against the Muslims and the nature, causes, and consequences of that failure and the subsequent Byzantine success in persevering – although with grave difficulty – in Asia Minor. It is wrong to ignore both the historical background to the Muslims’ invasions and their sequel. The actual conquests deserve reexamination for what they may reveal about the nature of Byzantine institutions and warfare at that time and about the reasons for the empire’s failure to develop an adequate response to the early challenges, or stated in another way, the transformation of late Roman military, political, and social institutions and conditions into middle Byzantine, Islamic, and even medieval ones.

SOURCES AND SOURCE PROBLEMS

This study rests upon earlier scholars’ painstaking criticism of sources, both Arabic and non-Arabic. Much scholarly attention has been given to the obscurities and contradictions in the Arabic sources. Much of that criticism is justifiable, yet non-Arabic sources tend to be short and have their own problems. The date and the identity of the Armenian historian Sebōs are controversial, as are his sources, some of which appear to be Syriac.

2 Most notably, the terse information in the Greek chronicles of Theophanes and Nisibenus, and those written in Syriac.
3 Sebōs, Histoire d’Héraclius, trans. by F. Macler (Paris 1904). R. W. Thomson and Nina Ganson have discovered many errors in the old Macler translation; there is a new critical
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claims to draw on information from prisoners (probably Armenian, but possibly including other ethnic groups) who had fought the Muslims. It is possible that he or his source did converse with Armenian soldiers who had fought in Byzantine Syria or in Persia against the Muslims. The eighth-century Armenian historian Ghevond also used Syriac sources for his earliest passages on the seventh century. The references to seventh-century history in the History of Taron by Pseudo-Yovhannes Mamikonian are very suspicious.

The extant Byzantine historical narratives and chronicles concerning the reign of Heraclius (610–41) are few in number and date from later centuries. Most important are the brief history of Nicephorus, from the late eighth century, and the chronicle traditionally identified as that of Theophanes, from the second decade of the ninth century. The important question of their sources and their use of sources is unresolved. The Byzantine tradition contains bias and cannot serve as an objective standard against which all Muslim accounts may be confidently checked. Its contents require critical scrutiny too.

The few shreds of information about the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius’ (610–41) role in the defense of Syria were not mere topoi, but it is worth considering what the rhetorical tradition had laid down as normal for the literary treatment of an emperor, namely, inclusion of praise of the emperor for avoiding the ambushes of the enemy while contriving those of his own for the enemy. Those who constructed their histories of Heraclius’ reign may have been influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by an earlier rhetorical


4 Sebors, Hist. c. 30 (102 Macler); cf. Heinrich Hübschmann, Zur Geschichte Armeniens und der ersten Kriege der Araber (Leipzig 1857) 18, n.3.

5 Ghevond or Levontius, History of Lewond the Eminent Vardapet of the Armenians, trans. and comment. by Zaven Arzoianian (Wynnewood, PA 1982).


tradition that the ideal emperor should anticipate and avoid the ambushes of the enemy and instead prepare ones of his own for the enemy. Heraclius conforms to this in the scraps of Byzantine historical tradition: he warns his commanders against the danger of engaging the Arabs in open battle, but his commanders ignore his warning and fall into the very traps that he feared and cautioned against. Yet the existence of such a tradition requires that the investigator be aware of and prepared to evaluate and, if necessary, discount such reports. Such a rhetorical tradition may have goaded and influenced Heraclius himself, as well as his contemporary historians, into warning his commanders and soldiers against the artifices of their enemies.

Some unidentified and probably Syriac Christian historical source or sources provided some important information for the Byzantine historical tradition about the reign of Heraclius, including events such as Byzantine military actions against the initial Muslim invasions. These historical traditions, which originated while the Heraclian dynasty still ruled the Byzantine Empire, had to explain the potentially embarrassing if not disastrous final responsibility of the dynasty’s founder, Heraclius, for the catastrophic loss of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Byzantine Mesopotamia. The creators of these traditions, or at least some of them, sought to protect the prestige of Heraclius and his dynasty from being sullied by these enormous defeats. All errors appear to fall on someone or something other than Heraclius: a narrow-minded eunuch who irritates Arabs, rebellious Armenian soldiers who proclaim their General Vahān emperor at the battle of the Yarmūk, Heraclius’ illness, confused officials who erroneously make truces with the Muslims that Heraclius later rejects, and dust clouds at Yarmūk that hamper the vision of the embattled Byzantine soldiers. No responsibility attaches to Heraclius himself for these actions. A later layer of criticism attributes the defeats to Heraclius’ arrogance and divine wrath for his mistaken compromise theological formula of Monotheletism (one will) in the raging Christological controversy over whether Jesus Christ had one or two natures. The historiography of the court of Heraclius systematically distorted the history of the immediately preceding imperial reigns, namely, those of Maurice and Phocas.

The complete truth, of course, will probably never be known, but it is

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prudent to take a skeptical approach to the Byzantine traditions about the Muslim conquest, because invariably they seem—in a direct or indirect way—to attempt to deflect criticism of the Byzantine debacle from Heraclius to other persons, groups, and things. This is true even though to later generations, after the end of the Heraclian dynasty, Heraclius’ religious policy of Monothelitism was abhorrent. The tone had already been set: to save his person from responsibility for the military disasters. Some of this tradition probably is echoed even in the Muslim sources. There are convergences and divergences in the Muslim and Byzantine images of Heraclius. There is no precise way to discount the efforts of the anonymous Heraclian historical tradition to deflect criticism from Heraclius, and to discover how much actual historical distortion resulted. The result may be a disinclination for such sources to say much about any of these most painful events, which it was better to pass over in silence.10

Among the few Latin sources of interest are the seventh-century history of Fredegarius and two eighth-century Spanish chronicles, all of which draw on some Byzantine and oriental historical traditions.11

PROBLEMS IN NON-HISTORICAL SOURCES

Non-historical sources present a number of challenges. First, the range of this category of Byzantine sources is vast. They can range from papyri to sermons (most notably those of Patriarch Sophrónios of Jerusalem and St. Anastasius the Sinaitic), poetry (especially that of Sophrónios and George of Pisidia), correspondence often of a patristic provenance, apologetical treatises, including anti-Judaica—such as the Doctrina Iacobi nuper baptizati—an apocalyptic, hagiography, military manuals (in particular, the Strategikon of Maurice from the beginning of the seventh century), and other non-literary sources such as epigraphy, archaeology, and numismatics. Very competent studies exist for many of them. The authors of the most contemporary sources did not intend for their works to serve as historical accounts.12

10 Kaegi, “Initial Byzantine Reactions to the Arab Conquest,” ASR (this revised edn preferred).
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None of these sources contains a coherent account of any of the campaigns of the Muslim conquests, but some do contain invaluable details that survive nowhere else. Some of them provide especially welcome information for the investigation of both histoire événementielle (roughly translated, “history of events”) and the histoire des mentalités. In other words, these sources provide information that conforms well with the kinds of history that many historians want to write today, and they even offer some illumination of military events. But they require attentive reading.

The normal methodology for their utilization is, simply put, an old-fashioned patient reading and rereading of the texts for neglected evidence. Winnowing for the few grains of wheat among the chaff requires lots of work,13 but even that effort and the reexamination of the assumptions, logic, and conclusions of earlier scholars can result in some valuable gleanings.

Another and most important problem with using these sources is not so much an historiographical one or their use of traditions or their possible contamination with Muslim traditions, which usually is not the case. The reality is that these Byzantine authors were not consciously striving to record historical accounts. They lack any coherent chronology. None of them can hope to present a coherent picture of the contemporary Byzantines or Muslims or of the Byzantine or Islamic world. Sermons and correspondence conform to the frames of reference, expectations, and formidable constraints and canons of traditional literary Greek prose style and therefore are restricted in how they refer to Arabs and to Islam.

What these sources can provide is some evidence for the impressions that some Byzantines held about Islam and Arabs, and miscellaneous valuable details, but not necessarily any accurate information or comprehension of the internal history and character of Islamic community and its polity. That is important in itself. Their authors’ knowledge of events and conditions within the Arabian peninsula or Sassanian Irāq both before, during, and immediately following the Muslim conquests, regions that they had never visited firsthand, is hopelessly vague and muddled. They likewise show no accurate detailed knowledge of Muslim religious thought and should not normally be used as authorities for it. That is a vain search. No single one of such texts will conveniently provide the scholar with a lot of evidence, and whatever they do offer requires cautious and prudent assessment.

There are additional methodological problems. It is hazardous to project back information on techniques of Muslim warfare and ways to combat Muslims from later Byzantine and Muslim military manuals to the era of the earliest conquests, from which no Byzantine military manual survives.14

13 Jones, LKE vi.
14 Das Heerwesen der Muhammedener, ed. by F. Wustenfeld (Göttingen 1880).
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With respect to testing the validity of evidence or traditions in Islamic sources the most valuable comparative studies may not be specific comparison with certain Byzantine sources, literary or non-literary. More relevant and more reliable are comparisons with the patiently constructed cumulative evidence about late Antiquity in the Middle East that a range of modern archaeologists, historians, sigillographers, and epigraphers have constructed. That body of evidence does not rest on any single fragile historical source or tradition. When Muslim sources refer accurately and consistently to late Roman, i.e., early Byzantine, place-names, official nomenclature, military units, and religious and secular leaders, other uncorroborated information in those texts also deserves very serious attention.

Enough scholarly investigation has taken place to create some awareness of the risks and limitations in trying to draw historical allusions out of hagiographic texts and patristic dialogues. Religious sources such as the Pseudo-Methodius apocalypse and the Doctrina Iacobi nuper baptizati (c. 634) contain valuable contemporary material in an incidental and naive context, but they must be treated with caution. Some very worthwhile information also exists in such texts as the Vita and Miracula (Ἰωάννης, “Miracles”) of St. Anastasius the Persian (d. 628), and The Passion of the Sixty Martyrs of Gaza (probably written soon after 635).¹⁵ These sources contain important information about Palestine immediately prior to and contemporary with the Muslim invasions. They contain enough incidental details for specialists to appreciate just how firmly they reflect contemporary Byzantine realities. But they provide no coherent description of events. Only disconnected scraps of information survive, yet such sources help us to understand contemporary conditions. There are no seventh-century or eighth-century Byzantine geographical and travel texts about the Islamic world, and for that matter, none survive from the immediately following several centuries. No Byzantine travelers left accounts about the early Islamic world.

The corpus of writings attributed to St. Anastasius the Sinaite, who was a monk on Mt. Sinai, who visited Egypt and Syria and probably died after 700,

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provide the earliest surviving explicit references in Greek to some Byzantine–Muslim battles and illuminate some details of the conquests and contemporary conditions and moods.

ARABIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

This investigation contributes no new material on the complex issues of criticism of Arabic sources, and the sources of those sources, except the perspectives of a Byzantinist, in the light of the latest interpretations of Byzantine and late Roman history. Excellent historical research and writing was characteristic of Ahmad b. Yahyā al-Baladhūrī (d. 892), who wrote the Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān or “Book of Conquests of the Countries [Lands],” a rich compilation of early traditions, many of which are conflicting, about the conquests, classified by region. Baladhūrī also compiled his Ansāb al-Asḥāf (“The Genealogies of the Notables”), which concentrates on personalities but includes some references to events that are not found in his Futūḥ. Although far from perfect, Baladhūrī does cite differing authorities for many of his traditions and points out some of their divergences. A number of the passages in his Futūḥ indicate that he had access to some early traditions that very probably derive ultimately from Greek or Syrian Christian sources, more likely oral rather than written ones. Some reflect an awareness of conditions existing at the time of the conquests. Yet he has also preserved many traditions that are suspicious, ones that sometimes reflect later juridical, religious, and fiscal reasoning and motivations and categories that cannot have been meaningful at the time of the original Muslim conquests. Some of Baladhūrī’s information is unique, while other pieces of it require careful critical control by comparison and weighing in the light of other sources, traditions, and historical information.16

Two of the best known and most reliable Arabic chronological histories of the conquests are those of al-Ṭabarī (AD 839–923) and al-Ya’qūbī (d. end of ninth or early tenth century).17 al-Ya’qūbī wrote both a history, Ta’rīkh, and a surviving geographical treatise entitled Kitāb al-Buldān, or “Description of Lands.” Their handling of Muslim traditions also has been and continues to

16 Baladhūrī, Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān, ed. by M. J. De Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1866; repr.), henceforth cited as Baladhūrī.

be the subject of much scholarly debate. al-Ya‘qūbî also wrote a now lost description of Byzantium. Both knew and recounted some essential features of late Roman, early Byzantine, and Sassanian Persian history. The scholarly investigation of their sources and associated historiographical problems has become increasingly sophisticated. Both contain much material of value, yet both histories require prudent assessment. One cannot speak of them alone, because one must also consider precisely which sources they are using in recounting specific events and information.

Another important source is the lengthy Kitāb al-futūḥ (“Book of Conquests”) of Abū Muhammad Ahmad b. A‘tham al-Kūfī, who was writing his work c. AD 819. It contains some useful traditions, but other sections of it contain fanciful and apologetical passages without any ring of authenticity or credibility. The History of Ibn Khayyāt al-‘Uṣfuri is a relatively early historical compendium, which records some useful material. Ibn Sallām’s Kitāb al-amwaḥ (“Book of the Treasuries” or “Book of Finances”) includes some early traditions and, moreover, was written by an author who was descended on one side from a Greek. He may have had access to unique Byzantine or other Christian materials. Ibn Sa‘d’s Kitāb al-Tabaqāt (“Book of Classes”) is a valuable ninth-century biographical encyclopedia full of many early historical traditions. Relatively early is a reference work of al-Ya‘qūbî b. Sufyān al-Fasawi, who died in 890, yet its scattered reliable traditions cannot provide the framework for understanding the conquists.18

All of these histories require careful sifting, as do their Byzantine counterparts. But the Muslim sources are much lengthier. It is impossible to reconstruct the conquests and Byzantine collapse from the sparse Byzantine sources. To complicate matters more, the principal Byzantine historical sources appear to be dependent in part on some common Muslim or Oriental sources. They are not entirely free-standing sources. Realization of this makes the interpretation and weighing of the reliability of respective Byzantine and Arabic sources even more delicate and difficult.

Leone Caetani,19 M. J. De Goeje, Miednikov, and Julius Wellhausen


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rigorously criticized the Arabic sources.²⁰ Noth more or less refutes the concept of Wellhausen and De Goeje that one “school” of Arabic historiography—particularly that of al-Waqidi—was more reliable than another; he sees them all as products of similar methods, with similar problems.²¹ A. A. Duri and Fred M. Donner contributed to the solution of this scholarly problem.²² I neither accept in toto nor engage in radical rejection of all early Muslim traditions. Where they appear to conform to and offer the best explanations in the light of late Roman and Byzantine conditions, not merely Byzantine historical traditions, they deserve serious consideration. The most reliable traditions appear to be those of al-Waqidi, Ibn Ishāq, and ‘Ikrima, while those of Sayf b. ‘Umar and Ibn A’tham al-Kūfī are less reliable but sometimes indispensable.²³

Some of the traditions in al-Azdī al-Baṣrī’s Ta’rīkh fustūḥ al-Shām (“History of the Conquest of Syria”) are not as improbable as the young De Goeje argued in 1864.²⁴ ‘Abd al-Mun‘im b. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Āmir claims to have reedited this source on the basis of a recently discovered Damasc us manuscript in 1970. Although L. I. Conrad has discovered some very serious problems with ‘Āmir’s edition, he nevertheless dates Azdī’s authorship to the second century AH and provides convincing evidence for the value of Azdī’s information.²⁵ Caetani even later conceded that Azdī’s original text contains

²⁰ N. A. Miednikov, Palestina ot zaroveniania evo arabami do krestroyich po arabskim sostachekom. 2 T. in 4 vols. (St. Petersburg 1897, 1907); J. Wellhausen, Skizzen und Vorarbeiten, vol. 6 (Berlin: Reimer, 1899).
²⁵ al-Azdī al-Baṣrī, Ta’rīkh fustūḥ al-Shām, ‘Āmir edn (Cairo 1970); older edn: William Nassau Lees, The Fostouk al-Sham, Being an Account of the Muslim Conquests in Syria, with a Few Notes (Bibliotheca Indica, 84, 85, Calcutta 1854–7); Lawrence I. Conrad, “Al-Azdī’s