BYZANTINA LODZIENSIA

XXII

Byzantium and the Arabs
The Encounter of Civilizations

from Sixth to Mid-Eighth Century

edited by

Teresa Wolińska

Paweł Filipczak

WYDAWNICTWO UNIWERSYTETU ŁÓDZKIEGO

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Series of the Department of Byzantine History of the University of Łódź

founded by

Professor Waldemar Ceran

in

1997

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Introduction

Byzantium and the Arabs. The Encounter of Civilisations. We never had doubts about the title. An encounter – not a clash. If we were to seek the starting point of the Byzantine history in the reign of Constantine the Great – and this is what we are doing in the Łódź centre of Byzantine studies – then the Byzantine-Arab relations, examined in a long, multi-century perspective, shall appear to be a very complex phenomenon, one fluctuating between two extreme poles: peaceful co-existence and armed hostile actions, presenting varying degrees of threat to both of the sides. Times between the fourth and the mid-seventh century were those of an encounter: mutual cognizance, often multi-faceted infiltration – lingual or religious, but also political, economic and administrative – of the two great cultural spheres: Graeco-Roman and Oriental. Such an understanding of the Byzantine-Arab neighbourhood is certainly not unique to us. In 2011, a large conference was organised at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki; it was dedicated to Byzantine-Arab relations and, quite significantly, it was entitled *Byzantium and the Arabs. Encounter of Civilisations*. The correlation between the title of the aforementioned scholarly meeting (as well as of the title of its resultant volume) and the title of our book is impossible to miss. Admittedly, the Thessalonikan debates gave us a direct impulse to study the relationships between the Byzantine and Arab worlds – something we desired to do for many years.

Although we are writing about the encounter of civilisations, we cannot deny that they did, also, clash at times. During the mid-seventh century, the Muslims performed a military takeover of nearly all of the Byzantine Near East. It was achieved with violence, often brutality; there is no doubt about that. However it is impossible to ignore the fact that on the timeline of Byzantine-Arab relations, the Muslim conquest was a one-off event; even though simultaneously it is of critical significance, from the historical perspective. Following this clash, the Byzantine element in the Near East – devoid of the structures of imperial power, "represented" solely by the Greek-speaking populace and the local Churches – weakened considerably, and in some places became entirely extinct. This, however, did not happen instantly, but over time, during the new stage of co-existence between the two civilisations – though this time not within the Byzantine empire's borders, but within the caliphate.

The book's framing, accepting the Muslim conquest as the most clear chronological point, is based on three clear parts: the "before" the conquest, "during", and "after" the conquest. The exact contents of each of the parts are, of course, detailed in the table of contents – here we only wish to present a few general remarks. The majority of the chapters are scholarly *par excellence*, but there are also a few that – while maintaining the scholarly apparatus – are somewhat "lighter" and in their form resemble essays. This is intentional, agreed with the Press, but at the same time stemming from our deep conviction that a scholarly volume – and let us stress here that we are dealing with such – ought also to be comprehensible for readers without Byzantinological or Arabistic background. The stylistic differences between the chapters arise from the fact that the book has seven different authors. Some of its parts are more focused on sources, are analytical and examine fine details, others – on the contrary – are more general introductions or summarise particular topics. Even these, however, when we consider the vast amounts of academic literature that are nowadays being published, have great value. We are also dealing here with a compromise, as we are attempting to adopt a synthetic approach to nearly three centuries of history, extremely abundant in phenomena and processes that are often difficult to interpret. We could not have written about everything in as much detail as we would have liked to. Some of the themes or persons, while tied to Byzantine-Arab relations, have first and foremost a separate substance of their own, such as the person of Muḥammad or the emergence of the Islam, have been placed in the background, and are not discussed in detail.

It is always difficult to adopt a single, consistent and universally accepted approach to the matter of transcribing names from scripts other than Latin. We have adopted the following: Arabic names – primarily those of chieftains, caliphs, scholars, deities – are always given in a form containing diacritical marks (where such are present). We have done the same in the case of Arabic technical terms, referring to various taxes, the names of administrative units, social or religious groups, and certain events or historical phenomena. In such cases we are following *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (of which we have primarily used the second edition), and to a lesser extent *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but we have also made recourse to indices of names from the best-known works in the English language, published in reputable series (primarily: *The Formation of the Classical Islamic World*, *Variorum Collected Studies Series*, and *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*).

We have done differently with geographic and ethnographic names. In case of terms ingrained in the English language, referring to not only historical reality but also to modern names of cities (Aden, Medina etc.) and states (Bahrain, Oman, Yemen etc.) we have used a simplified spelling, devoid of diacritical marks; we consider this to be the most clear, and thus fully justified. We were not pioneers in abandoning the exact diacritical notation – *Barrington Atlas of Greek and Roman World* abandoned the exact spelling of Arabic toponyms altogether.

In case of geographic terms that are not commonly used in the English language, ones that are not an intrinsic part of this language, and almost exclusively referring to less well-known, local toponyms, used in this book in a clearly historical context, we have retained the spelling that includes diacritical marks, whenever using them is necessary (occasionally, a variant form is used, e.g. Najd or Nadjd).

The risk of using the proposed criteria depends on a certain arbitrariness of what is considered linguistically more universal, and what more specific. The best example: Hejaz or Al-Ḥidjāz? There may be exceptions from the rules – the capital of Yemen, but at the same time an important historical centre, is spelled here Sana'a rather than Sana. Moreover, the works of modern scholars publishing in the English language do occasionally contain, major or minor, discrepancies in spelling of some of the names and terms.

As regards the Greek or Latin names denoting people or places, the scale of the problem was much smaller. We most commonly used Anglicised versions (e.g. Timothy rather than Timotheus or Timotheos, or Tyre rather than Tyrus or Tyros).

The spelling of non-Latin geographical and personal names is subject to the rules accepted in the volume, but to some extent it also arises from habit and literary tastes. In all cases, we have accepted common sense as the chief rule. This means that the proper name always ought to easily and unquestionably identify a person or a place. Any possible inaccuracies arising from the rules and principles described above would be the sole responsibility of the volume's scholarly editors.

We would like to thank the whole team of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe (*Ceraneum*) at Łódź University for the highly supportive attitude to our work. We thank Professor Maciej Kokoszko, director of the Centre, and the employees of the Centre's office, Dr Karolina Krzeszewska and Dr Krzysztof Jagusiak, for assisting in efficiently performing numerous formal tasks associated with running of the project. Particular thanks are due to Dr Zofia Brzozowska, who was the first Reader of this book, a tireless editor and proof-reader of our texts and a true caretaker, so to speak, of the administrative side of the project. As always, we could count on the support of our Colleagues from *Ceraneum* and from our parent research unit, the Department of Byzantine History at the Institute of History of the University of Łódź: Professor Mirosław J. Leszka and Professor Sławomir Bralewski, as well as of Dr Kirił Marinow and Dr Andrzej Kompa. Mirosław and Andrzej, as usual in the case of the *Byzantina Lodziensia* series, extended editorial care to the book, offering advice during the exceedingly complex process of preparing the book for print. We owe thanks to Professor Marek M. Dziekan and Marta Woźniak from the Department of Middle East and North Africa Studies for consultation regarding Arabic names. We thank Professor Jacek Bonarek from the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, the branch in Piotrków Trybunalski for the meticulous and positive editorial review. We thank Michał Zytka and Bruce Borne for editing and proof-reading of the English text.

The materials for the book were gathered in numerous libraries, both Polish and foreign. In the first instance, however, we need to list the Library of the Łódź University, directed by the custodian Mgr. Tomasz Piestrzyński, patient and favourable towards our successive initiatives aimed at expanding the *Ceraneum*'s book collection. We also thank Brother Riccardo Rączka from the *Pontificio Instituto Orientale* library in Rome and Ms. Carla Chalhoub from the Jaffet Library of the American University in Beirut for enabling our quick access to their collections and comfortable working conditions. Finally, we could always expect a warm welcome in the libraries of the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki and the local Centre for Byzantine Research, "Melissa".

Teresa Wolińska
Paweł Filipczak

PART
I

Sławomir Bralewski, Zofia A. Brzozowska,
Marek M. Dziekan, Paweł Filipczak, Teresa Wolińska

Before the Conquest

Paweł Filipczak

1. Geography and Environmental Conditions of Syro-Palestine. The Region's Geopolitical Importance in Late Antiquity

The path that led to Syria was narrow and muddy. Originating in Cilicia, it ran, as long as the weather was dry, over the precipices of the Amanus Mountains. In the rain, it dissolved into mud, and the passage through the mountains became extremely difficult, if not impossible. The decision to broaden and level the route was taken by Emperor Justinian I himself, who allocated significant means for the realization of the project[1]. This brief account, given by a Byzantine

[1] Procopius, *De aedificiis*, V, 5.

historian, Procopius of Caesarea, although it is derived from a work tendentiously favourable to this ruler, seems to be accurate. For, as we know from other sources, Justinian actually launched a large scale building programme in a number of places in Syro-Palestine[2].

Looking at a map, a long and massive range of the Amanus Mountains (today Nur Daĝlari) can easily be seen encircling the Alexandretta bay (İskenderun Körfezi) in a long, wide curve. The mountains run along longitude lines, stretching between the Mediterranean coast and the Taurus ridge, and clearly blocking the access to Syria from the direction of Asia Minor. One of the few relatively convenient passages, the one mentioned by Procopius, lay about 15 km from the sea, at an altitude of 700 m above sea level. Often referred to as the Syrian Gates, it is known today as the Belen Pass. An important communication route existed there long before the reign of Justinian I. North of the Syrian Gates, there was another mountain pass, usually called the Amanian Gate (Bahçe Geçidi). Less known, it, too, provided a way inland[3]. Thus the mountains, despite being 2240 m high and reaching down to the sea, offered access to the Syrian interior.

The descent from the Syrian Gates led down onto the vast Amuk plain which, extending between the Mediterranean Sea and the hills in the central part of the country, occupied the north-western part of Syria (today within Turkey). The most important city of the region, and at the same time the largest centre of the whole of Syro-Palestine, was Antioch on the Orontes. In the era of the late Roman Empire, it was a heavily-populated cosmopolitan metropolis, the major trading and artisan centre, reputedly inhabited by as many as several hundred thousand people. Destroyed by the powerful earthquakes of 526 and 528 and ravaged by the Persians in 540, in the seventh century its glory days were over, although it still played some economic, military and political role. In the 30s of this century, Emperor Heraclius used the city as the base from which to coordinate military action against the Arabs[4].

---

[2] For example: John Malalas, XVIII, 2; XVIII, 28; XVIII, 29; XVIII, 31.

[3] For more on the issue see: *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, ed. R.J.A. Talbert, Princeton 2000, p. 67; *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, vol. 5.1, *Kilikien und Isaurien*, eds. F. Hild, H. Hellenkemper, Wien 1990, p. 174; I. Benzinger, [in:] *RE*, vol. I, cols. 1723–1724 [s.v. Ἀμανίδες πύλαι]; I. Benzinger, [in:] *RE*, vol. I, col. 1724 [s.v. *Amanos*]. On Syria's historical geography see a classic work: R. Dussaud, *Topographie historique de la Syrie antique et médiévale*, Paris 1927, *passim*; see also F. Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC–AD 337*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 236–242; M. Sartre, *D'Alexandre à Zenobie. Histoire du Levant antique (IVe siècle av. J.-C.–IIIe siècle ap. J.-C.)*, Paris–Beyrouth 2001, pp. 37–38, 69. For more bibliographical information see: M.A. Casanova, A. Egea Vivancos, *Selección bibliográfica sobre La Siria romano-cristiana*, AnC 15, 1998, p. 18.

[4] One of the most important work on the history of Antioch – G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest*, Princeton 1961, pp. 574–581 (Heraclius'

An important role in Antioch's life was played by a small coastal town called Seleucia Pieria. It owed its position to a conveniently situated harbour and a waterway – in the lower course of the Orontes River – which made it possible to transport army goods and all sorts of commercial commodities straight to Antioch and thence further to north-eastern Syria and Upper Mesopotamia. However, much evidence suggests that Seleucia, just like Antioch, suffered a lot of damage during the earthquakes mentioned above. Its harbour is most likely to have been silted up. The role of Seleucia was then assumed by a number of smaller towns scattered around the Orontes' estuary, Al-Mīnā being the most important among them (its ancient name remains unknown)[5].

Looking from the north, Seleucia is just the first of a great number of Syria's coastal towns. Although the road running south, parallel to the sea, is wedged apart by the vast massif Djabal an Nāṣiriyya, further south of this mountain range, from Latakia to faraway Gaza, the coastline stretches unceasingly straight. Adjacent to it is a narrow strip of fertile land. It is coastal lowland, bounded to the east and the interior by mountain ridges lying along the coast – its width ranges from just a few hundred metres to between ten and twenty kilometres. The sea moisture retained in the western hillsides – average annual rainfall here is 1100 mm – created perfect conditions for the development of agriculture. The soil was well-hydrated, especially as it was also misted by the brooks and rivers flowing down the mountains. And it is in the vicinity of these rivers' mouths – where the mountains had to give way to flat plains – that the towns were positioned. Traveling from the north, one passed Tripoli, Byblos, Beirut, Tyre, Sidon, Caesarea and Gaza – to name only the most well-known of them. Each of these coastal towns, in addition to having their own particular histories, were for centuries, including the Byzantine period, linked with one another in a variety of ways. All of them had their eyes turned towards the sea, relying for their economic development on the sea trade, which also often shaped their political history. Their large harbours opened up a way through which merchants and invaders could get to Cyprus, Crete, continental Greece and further afield

reign); among other works covering the sixth to eight centuries of particular note are: R. Ciocian-Yvanescu, *Sur le role d'Antioche au point de vue économique, social et culturel au VI^e siecle*, B 39, 1969, pp. 53–73; F. Trombley, *Demographic and Cultural Transition in the Territorium of Antioch, 6^th–8^th*, [in:] *Antioch de Syrie. Histoire, images et traces de la ville antique*, eds. B. Cabouret, P.-L. Gatier, C. Saliou, Lyon 2004, pp. 341–361.

[5] For more on Seleucia Pieria see: V. Chapot, *Sèleucie Pièrie*, MSNAF 66, 1907, pp. 1–78; P.A. Pirazzoli, *Seleucia Pieria: An Ancient Harbour Submitted to Two Successive Uplifts*, IJNA 21, 1992, pp. 317–327. For more on Al- Mīnā, see: T. Vorderstrasse, *A Port of Antioch: Late Antique Al-Mina*, [in:] *Antioch de Syrie. Histoire, images et traces*..., pp. 363–371.

to Italy and north Africa. And the safest and shortest sea route to Egypt started there, from the coast of Palestine[6].

It was not only a specific geographical location that enabled the Syrian coastal towns to acquire extra-regional significance. It was also highly qualified craftsmen to whom this coastal region owed its pre-eminent position. Some of the products made by local artisans were known for their peculiar style and luxurious character. This was particularly the case with the manufacturing of purple. The production of this dye was made possible by nature itself or, to be more precise, by snails of the Muricidae family that lived on the Syrian coast, somewhere between Tyre and Sidon. Three local species – *Murex trunculus*, *Murex brandaris*, *Purpura haemastoma* – referred to as murexes, secreted a light-yellow smelly mucus (the snails used the secretion as a protection against sea predators, or as an antimicrobial lining on egg masses). When the shell was opened, the light made the colour of the substance turn from light-yellow to purple. Drawing on this property, it may have been at the time of the Phoenician confederation or even earlier that a way of producing this precious dye on a large scale was developed. It continued to be known in the era of Rome and Byzantium. The snails' bodies were separated from the shells, gathered in big lead vats and salted. Then the vats were filled with urine. It took about three days before the snails began to ferment, acquiring a durable, purple colour. The cloth to be dyed was soaked directly in the vats. The whole process, beginning with the snail netting and ending with the cloth dyeing, took a significant length of time and required a lot of effort, without ensuring consistent results. However, the colours obtained in this way were very beautiful, their shades ranging from scarlet to dark purple. Purple-dyed robes were indicative of significant wealth and high social status. In the period of the late Roman Empire, including the reign of Justinian I, the production of purple fabric was subject to strict control by the state, with only the closest members of the imperial family enjoying the right to wear purple clothes or shoes[7].

Silk weaving was also peculiar to the region. Workshops processing raw silk into fabric or using ready-made silk materials exported from China were located

[6] A detailed description of coastal towns is to be found in: R. D u s s a u d, *La topographie...*, pp. 5–74 (Tyre, Beirut, Sidon and their vicinity), pp. 75–94 (Tripolis, along with neighbouring area); P.K. H i t t i, *Syria. A Short History*, New York 1959, pp. 16–18; G. D o w n e y, *A History of Antioch...*, pp. 19–20. See also: F. M i l l a r, *The Roman Near East...*, pp. 264–267; M. S a r t r e, *D'Alexandre à Zenobie...*, pp. 39–49.

[7] M. M o n a g h a n, *Purple*, [in:] *CDCS*, p. 735; G. S t e i g e r w a l d, *Das kaiserliche Purpurprivileg in spätrömischer und frühbyzantinischer Zeit*, JAC 33, 1990, pp. 209–239.

in Beirut and Tyre – *whence this commodity was distributed all over the world*[8]. Among a great number of different trades that established their presence in this part of Syro-Palestine of particular note was the glass production. It flourished especially in Tyre, Sidon and Beirut. Beirut was known, even far outside of Syria, for producing highly-praised window glass[9].

The development of the coastal cities was violently halted by the earthquakes taking place at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries. The tremors of 15 July 551 are considered to have been the most destructive, with Beirut being reduced to rubble and Tripoli, Byblos, Tyre and Sidon also suffering serious damage. On the initiative of the imperial authorities the cities began to be rebuilt (Justinian I contributed significantly to their reconstruction), slowly resuming their normal activity – although none of them, either in demographic or in urbanistic terms, was ever restored to its former glory. The capture of these coastal cities, even if they were no longer what they used to be, meant that the Arabs obtained access to areas with great economic potential. The cities turned out to be easy to conquer. Most, like Antioch, the capital of the region, were taken over without a fight, their surrender being sealed by an agreement which the Arabs concluded with the local population. There were some exceptions to this rule – Caesarea Maritima was seized after a long siege; in Tripoli, a significant number of its inhabitants were evacuated by the imperial fleet, thus fleeing from the besieged city.

Standing at the seaside in any of these towns and looking eastward, one could see mountain ridges. At the latitude of Latakia there was the mountain range of Bargylus, with an average height of over 1500 m. It descended gently towards the ancient city of Emesa (Homs, Syria)[10]. Lying further to the south, behind the Homs Pass, were the highest mountains in the whole of Syro-Palestine – the Lebanon mountains. Consisting of a few ranges, bounded by the maritime plain of Akkar in the north and by the valley of the River Litani (Nahr al-Līṭānī, the ancient Leontes, Lebanon) in the south, they extended over a total length of 170 km. Two smaller chains, rising to between 1700 and 2000 m, formed the southern part of the massif. The middle and northern ranges were

[8] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 25. See also A. Muthesius, *Essential Processes. Looms, Technical Aspects of the Production of Silk Textiles*, [in:] *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. A.I. Laiou, Washington 2002, pp. 146–168 (enhanced by extensive bibliography of older works).

[9] R. Mouterde, *Inscriptions grecques mentionnant des artisans de la Béryte byzantine*, CRAIBL 73, 1929, pp. 96–102; N. Jidejian, *Beirut through the Ages*, Beyrouth 1973, pp. 155–156.

[10] For comparison see: J.-P. Rey-Coquais, *Arados et sa Pérée aux époques grecque, romaine et byzantine*, Paris 1974, pp. 66.