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MILITARY INTELLIGENCE IN ARABO-BYZANTINE NAVAL WARFARE*

During the long Arab-Byzantine struggle for supremacy in the Mediterranean Sea from the seventh to the fourteenth century an unexplored factor, of paramount importance, was their military naval intelligence. An attempt will be made in the present paper to present some facets of this complex topic about which little has been written.

Ports

Naval intelligence starts from the ports. Arabic and Byzantine sources scrupulously describe how the defense of the ports must be organized in order to prevent infiltration by foreign ships and agents, while historical sources reveal that in spite of all precautions intelligence gathering continued to thrive. The play of cat and mouse never ended.

The best instructions for protection against spying in general and naval intelligence in particular are to be found in a short manual on naval warfare inserted in the major work of Qudâma bn. Ja'far, known as Kitâb al-Kharâj.

In Ibn Qudâma's manual the Emir instructs the authorities to be vigilant with foreigners entering the Dâr al-Islâm. He advises thorough checking to ensure that they do not return to their countries with weapons or any war supplies. Likewise, the legislator Abû Yûsuf in his book Kitâb al-Kharâj states that foreign merchants

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* This article was mainly written at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, New Jersey, during the time I was a visiting member in October 1996. I would like to thank professor G. Bowersock for his kind invitation and Professor B. Lewis who has encouraged my efforts in the field of military intelligence.

1. The topic of military intelligence during the Arabo-Byzantine struggle in general is of great interest and importance. My former students Dr. N. Koutrakou and Dr. G. Taher have undertaken the task to accomplish this work.


3. Ibid.
in the land of Islam should be investigated and any weapons they possess confiscated; not even horses should be permitted to leave with them.\(^4\)

Moreover, according to Abū Yusuf, the Emir warns that the merchants' papers must be examined and if they contain any important secret information regarding the land of Islam, they should immediately be arrested; it will be left to the Imam to determine their punishment.\(^5\)

Punishment of spies was cruel. Non-Muslims could be condemned to death, often by crucifixion, to serve as an example. Muslim spies could be also condemned to death but not crucified.\(^6\)

Ibn Qudāma's most specific instructions on naval intelligence focus on port safety.\(^7\)

Wa amarahu an yağūmma al- marākiba fīl mawāni'y allati tarsā fīhā.

«He [the Emir] orders him [the commander] to place the ships together in the ports, in the place where they anchor».

Hatta la yakhrudja minhā markabun illā bi'tmihi wa la yadhkhulu fīhā ghayruhā.

«[The port commander should be constantly on the alert] so that no ship leaves port without his knowledge and that no ship enters without his permission».

Every ship entering an Arab port had to have special permission from the Arab authorities. Every merchant entering a port also needed the proper papers. Details of such papers appear in the recently published Geniza documents of G. Khan. They were in the form of 'iqrarāt and «such 'iqrarāt were drafted by notaries and witnessed by professional witnesses of certified honesty (ʻudūl). The documents were validated by a judge and registered in the archives.\(^8\)

In Qudāma's manual the Emir mentions explicitly the existence of foreign spies ready to penetrate Arab ports:

Wa amarahu bishiddati al hadhari min djawa'sī al-'aduwi.

«He [the Emir] ordered him [the commander] to pay utmost attention to the spies of the enemy».

It is noteworthy that the Arabs respected any foreign ship sailing into their ports if it carried the proper documents. Even when a foreign ship was suspected of entering an Arab port illegally and its crew pretended to be merchants, they could not be immediately arrested. Abū Yusuf says that if a crew posing as merchants carrying goods to the Muslims were proved to be liars, then the ship would be

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6. Ibd.
7. See Qudāma, ed. H. Khaḍīvajum, p. 25.
confiscated and the men sent to be judged by the Imam. He adds that if a foreign ship is forced by the weather to seek refuge in a Muslim port and the crew declares falsely that they carry a letter to the Imam, their ships will be confiscated and the Imam will decide their fate.\(^9\)

It was understood that trade and intelligence went (and still go) hand in hand. Travelling merchants could double easily as intelligence agents and the tenth century writer, Ibn Ḥawqal, complains of the ease with which the Byzantine cargo ships frequented the Syrian ports gathered crucial information\(^10\).

In order to defend the coastal towns against Byzantine raids in times of war, the Arabs constructed a series of defense towers from the Pharos of Alexandria to the Atlantic Ocean. They were called *ribāţ* and dedicated soldiers, the *murābiṭūn*, a class of ascetic warriors, undertook the task of watching out for any approaching ships. Some of their constructions were developed from earlier Byzantine towers\(^11\) (Fig. 1A, 1B). In addition to the *ribāţ*, the Arabs, like the Byzantines, used chains to protect their ports. Such chains were drawn across the entrance to the port of Tunis.

In spite of all these measures, enemies found various ways of infiltrating. One of the most intensive uses of espionage against the Arabs of Alexandria occurred during the period when Byzantine Cyprus was in the hands of the Franks, the house of Lusignan, who became master of this island in 1192. Alexandria at that time was a prosperous port with lucrative trade, importing timber and iron from Venice and silk and other products from the East\(^12\).

The French rulers of Cyprus flooded Egypt with spies and a number of their spies reached as far inland as Cairo disguised as women; they were arrested and punished accordingly. One of their spies, disguised as *faqīr* (wondering holy man), managed to reach the area of Aboukir (the sensitive Egyptian port where Nelson burned Napoleon’s ships in 1798). The *faqīr* had friendly relations with the local fishermen who readily filled his request for fish for his entourage, whereupon he lit a bonfire supposedly to cook the fish but in reality to signal his compatriots, waiting offshore in their ships. Once within Aboukir they raised havoc. The pseudo-faqīr spy was able to disappear without a trace\(^13\).

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Turning our attention to the Byzantines, we notice that their naval manuals are more succinct and any information is presented discreetly because of the fear that it could be used by enemies. Two passages, one found in Leo VI’s Naumachica and the second in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' De administrando imperio, vividly express their authors’ anxiety about the need to safeguard their information from the foreign (Arab) agents. Leo VI expressing his fear for foreign intelligence writes:¹⁴

*Εἰς δὲ καὶ ἔτοις ἄρχαίοις ἐπινοεῖτα, ἐν τῷ πλωτῷ πολέμῳ ἐπιπολείμματα, καὶ ἐν δὲ ἐπινοεῖναι δυνάμενα, διὰ ἐν τῷ παρόντι γράφειν διά τήν συντομίαν ἀνοίκειον ἴππονμεθα, τινά δὲ καὶ ἀδύναμον διὰ τὸ μὴ ἐφονιζοῦσα τοῖς πολεμίοις καὶ μᾶλλον ἐκείνους χρήσθαι αὐτοῖς καθ’ ἕμον.*

Constantine Porphyrogenitus, whose fear of information being leaked to the enemy is manifest, states that the liquid fire was given to the Byzantines by an angel to be used solely by Christians, whose duty was to keep it secret.¹⁵

Unfortunately for the Byzantines their main naval manual, the Naumachica of Leo VI, which is actually part of his Taktika, had been at least partly translated into Arabic, and Ibn al-Manqali (Mangli) scornfully remarks «this is what he the Wise writes about such and such things but we know even more in addition to what he said».¹⁶

The Byzantines, like the Arabs, took special precautions in order to protect their ports and their anchored ships. Leo VI advised their commanders to use the utmost vigilance in such cases.¹⁷ Of course, as a general principle this has never lost its validity. When Napoleon forgot it and left his fleet unprotected in Aboukir during his invasion of Egypt in 1798, Nelson was quick to attack and destroyed it.

For both Byzantines and Arabs, raids in war time were a commonplace. Yet they too let Arab cargo ships anchor in their ports provided that they were equipped with the proper credentials. The late tenth-century wreck of a Muslim ship recently found in Serçe Liman, Asia Minor, testifies to the freedom of trade in times of peace.¹⁸

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¹⁴ Leo VI, Naumachica, I, 72; ed. A. Dain, Paris 1943, p. 31.
¹⁷ Naumachica, I, 33; Dain, p. 25: Ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ γῆ πλησίως ήτε πολέμους παρείναι που ἐλάτεις, πάντως χρῆ ἐν βιγδόν εἶχαι μακροδέν καὶ κατὰ γῆν καὶ κατὰ θάλασσαν, καὶ μικράτως διατελεῖς καὶ καππαρλαμένον καὶ ἐποιμὸν εἶχας ἀρόσις παράταξιν. πολλὰ γὰρ αὐτὸς πολεμίων ἐπιβαστεῖ. Καὶ γὰρ ἢ κατὰ γῆς εὑρόντες σε ὑδροῦντα βιασάονται, ἐν τίγεα δὲ καὶ τὰς ναῦς ἐμπρόσθενουν.
Naturally trade and intelligence also went hand in hand in Byzantine territory. A number of Byzantine castles in the interior and on the coast were often taken by the Arabs with the cooperation of spies who had penetrated them, or of local collaborators.  

An interesting passage in Kekaumenos' *Strategikon*, written in the eleventh century, offers us insights into the many facets involved in trade, spying, defense of castles, and traitors. Instructions concerning naval military intelligence are followed by examples of actual events. The advice appears in the form of orders to a commander of a castle. It is suggested on the one hand that he be aware of enemies trying to penetrate the castle but, on the other hand, that he permit any foreigners, including known enemies, to engage in commercial transactions but not close to the castle.  

> Εάν ἔλθῃ ἐθνος εἰς τὸ κάστρον οὗτοι καὶ ποιήσῃ ἐγκατάστασιν ... μὴ πιστεύεις αὐτῷ ... καὶ εἰ θελήσῃ ποιήσαι πανήγυριν πολεῖν τε καὶ ἀγοράζειν ποιησάτω πλὴν μὴ ἱστησθαι ταύτης συννεγήσεως τοῦ κάστρου.

The author goes on to describe an incident that took place in the city of Dimitrias (today's Volos). Five Arab ships arrived in the port seeking peace and trade instead of war. After an agreement was reached and they had begun selling their wares, a Byzantine traitor helped them to sack the town. It is a familiar story.

*Scouting and Spying Ships. Commandos*

The next question is what types of ships were used for spying. Here we must bear in mind that there is no distinction between scouting and spying ships. Not surprisingly, such ships existed in both the Arab and Byzantine fleets. But in both Greek and Arabic sources there are no detailed descriptions of such ships. It is obvious that these ships were not restricted to just one type.

Leo VI, in one passage, describes the spying-scouting ships, which he calls «galea», as one banked and swift. In another passage speaking again about scouting and spying ships he divides them into two categories: the small swift dromons and the lighter vessels called «galea».

The use of light dromons as scouting ships appears in the *Life of Saint Theodore of Cythra*, written in the middle of the tenth century, which gives us a glimpse of the overall situation in the Aegean at this period. It was the time of the

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Arab occupation of Crete (ca. 824-961) in which great tension prevailed in the Aegean and there were repeated clashes on a small scale. They were not full scale battles such as those between the Spanish armada and the British navy, but they were frequent. Of course, short periods of peace were arranged to permit the exchange of prisoners.

The Byzantine navy at that time, as N. Oikonomides, editor of the Life of Saint Theodore of Cythera, points out, was divided in two: half the ships remained in Constantinople, while the rest, the Thematic fleet, scouted in the Aegean.

In the Life we meet a squadron of four chelandia, scouting around the island of Cythera. Scouting in four, two in front and two behind, had been suggested by Leo VI.

The Life of Saint Theodore calls the Byzantine scouting ships «chelandia». They carried a crew of ninety each. Chelandion is frequently a term used as a synonym for dromon, the average Byzantine warship. But as Ch. Makrypoulos has recently shown, chelandion could also mean, in a stricter sense, the lighter dromon. The typical scouting ship is usually smaller and single-banked with a mast. Occasionally, this type of ship can be identified with the myoparon, which is depicted in a drawing in a Tunisian mosaic (3rd-4th c. A.D.) (Fig. 2, n° 11).

Turning to the Arab fleet we notice that the Arabic sources call their spying ships «jasus», but without any description of their structure and function. They report simply that the spy ships are used for exploration and gathering information.

The smallest type of spying scouting ship of the Arabs is the type of shakhur, usually, but not always, a small single-banked ship with a mast. A larger ship used for scouting is of the type bārij. It is a swift craft which, according to Tābarī, usually

27. Leo VI, Naumachica, p. 25: Dain, p. 23. Actually Leo suggests 3-5 ships.
29. M. Reddé, Mare nostrum, Rome 1986, Fig. 8, no. 11.
Fig. 2. Depiction of a ship of the type of *myoparon* (often used as a *kataskopos naus*, *speculatoris navis*). Mosaic of Althiburus in North Africa. Michel Reddé, *Mare Nostrum*, Rome 1986, Fig. 8,11.
carried about forty-five men: a governor (ishtiyām), three fire throwers (nafāsīn), a carpenter (najjār), a baker (khabhāz) and thirty-nine oarsmen and marines (jadāfīn, muqātila)\textsuperscript{31}.

This is all the information I have been able to find about Arab and/or Byzantine spying ships and even our knowledge of the dromon and the corresponding Arab warship shīnī is still incomplete\textsuperscript{32}. Iconography is only of little help since Byzantine and Arab drawings are sketchy (see Figs. 3, 4).

The only detailed information I have uncovered regarding spying ships and commandos concerns the early Byzantine or Late Roman period. Vegetius, the fourth-century author of Epitoma Rei militaris (Digest of Military Affairs) addressed to the Emperor Theodosius (383-395), describes the spy-scout ships of his time\textsuperscript{33}. The scout boats had twenty oarsmen in single oar rooms. Their sails, ropes

![Fig. 3. Mamlouk warship (shīnī). Made of leather, depicting clearly the stern rudder and the officer in front. According to the Greek and Arabic sources he is armed. V. Christides, The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs, Fig. 17](image_url)

\textsuperscript{31} Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, XXI, ed. Beinut, n.d., p. 112.


and hulls are colored venetus (blue). Since warships were fast at that time these boats were fast but proper camouflage was even more important. Vegetius adds that the marines of these ships, a sort of commandos, wore venetus colored uniforms and were selected from the bravest men.

Commandos are also mentioned in the naval manual of Syrianus Magistrus, who describes their qualities and arms:

Κατὰ δὲ γῆν ἀστοστέλλων τοὺς μάλιστα κοινοτέρους τε καὶ ταχυτέρους τῶν ἄλλων, δὲὶ δὲ πρὸς τούτοις αὐτοῖς εἶναι ἀξιοδεικτέοις, εὐρύκοις, ἐπιτηδείους πρὸς τε κατασκοπὴν καὶ ἀπαγγελίαν τῶν ὀραθέντων ἢ ἀκοινοθέντων, μόνας τὰς μαχαίρας ἑπιφερομένους ...

In the Arabic sources the most illuminating description of the activities of commandos is reported by Ibn al-Qalānīṣī (d. 1160). He tells how a group of commandos embarked on Egyptian spy ships which were engaged in aggressive naval activities against the Crusaders’ ships stationed in occupied Tyre. The Egyptian commandos were dressed like Crusaders and spoke their language fluently. They first approached a big enemy warship and having taken it by surprise they burned it. Later they approached some pilgrim ships, captured, and destroyed them.

Further scrutiny of all relevant sources will surely disclose many other facets of naval intelligence during the Arabo-Byzantine rivalry, which lasted for centuries, from the foundation of the first Arabo-Islamic state (7th century) —which was the center of gravity of the Syro-Palestinian coast— until the navies of both parties were exhausted (ca. 14th century). Meanwhile, at the time of the Crusades, new maritime states in the Christian West emerged and developed rapidly, tipping the balance of power and finally acquiring supremacy.

I will end this discussion with two examples in which the use of naval intelligence can be inferred. In one of Mu‘āwiya’s raids against Cyprus, the Arabs abandoned the island hastily when they were informed that the Byzantine admiral Kakorizos was coming against them with a formidable fleet. Obviously, Arab spies in the Byzantine ports had managed to send the message. In another case

34. Ibid.
35. Syrianus Magistrus, Strategiae, IV, 6; ed. Dain, p. 47.
37. Ibid.
38. Theophanes, Chronographia, ed. C. de Boor, Leipzig 1883, p. 344.
39. It is understood, based on many other similar direct or indirect references, that both Arabs and Byzantines used their intelligence before undertaking any serious naval expedition. See Christides, The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs, p. 57 and note 133. See also Constantine Porphyrogenitus, op. cit., p. 660.
when the Arabs besieged Constantinople in 717-718, a number of their ships manned by Christian Copts deserted the fleet and escaped to Byzantine territory, most probably having been in touch with Byzantine agents.40

We must also take into consideration that naval intelligence—like any military intelligence—could be performed by agents who visited the enemy country on legitimate business—not only as merchants but moreover as ambassadors—and could easily gather information on ports and fleets.41

Finally it should be mentioned that throughout the Arabo-Byzantine struggle, supremacy at sea—based on international sea trade and powerful navies—was of paramount importance and consequently maritime intelligence provided a major deterrent against serious challenge by any of the opponents.

Additional Note

It is to be noticed that Diodor of Sicily reports how the Athenians under Kimon used a similar stratagem with the one mentioned above by Ibn al-Qalānīsī. They captured some Persian ships and embarked them, disguised as Persians. Thus the Athenians easily approached the enemy port and inflicted heavy casualties. Diodor of Sicily, XI, 61: ... ἐνεβίβασεν εἰς τὰς αἰχμαλωτιδὰς ναῦς τῶν ἰδίων τοὺς ἄριστους δοὺς πάρας καὶ τὴν ἄλλην κατασκευὴν περιθεὶς περικαὶν ...

40. Theophanes, Chronographia, p. 397: Οἱ δὲ τῶν δικὰ στόλων τούτων Ἀἰγύπτου καθ’ εὐαντιῶς ἔκαθεναμένοι νυκτὸς τοὺς τῶν κατίουν σανδάλους ἄριστης ἐν τῇ πόλει προσέφησον...
41. N. Koutrakou, «Diplomacy and Espionage: their Role in the Byzantine Foreign Relations», Greco-Arabica 6 (1995), p. 144. It is noteworthy that Koutrakou in her excellent article (p. 129 ff.) reports that the Byzantines, like the Arabs, used wandering holy men as spies.