



# The end of Islamic rule in Crete, the last exodus of the Muslims of the Emirate of Crete and the re-establishment of Byzantine Christian rule (961 CE)

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## Abstract

This article is an attempt at a comprehensive insight into the reasons for the refusal of the most important Islamic states, i.e. Umayyad Spain, Ikhshīdīd Egypt and Maghrebīan Africa, to assist the emirate of Crete on the eve of the Byzantines' expedition to reconquer the island of Crete (960-961 CE), followed by the exodus of a considerable part of the Muslim population and the reestablishment of Byzantine rule. Special attention is given to the Arabic source *Al-Mu'jib fī Talkhīs Akhbār al-Maghrib* by 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī. A fragment of this source, along with my English translation, is presented for the first time. It describes the exodus of the Muslim population of Crete on the eve of the Byzantines' siege of Chandax, the capital of the emirate of Crete (960). According to this source, part of the Muslim population embarked on the warships of the emirate of Crete and headed towards Alexandria, Sicily or Umayyad Spain (Dār al-Islām). Thus, a considerable part of the Muslim population of Crete escaped, but simultaneously the defense was weakened because of the loss of a large number of their warships which never returned to Crete. In conclusion, this discussion emphasizes the need for further research focused on the relevant Arabic sources which, along with renewed archaeological excavations, can complete our knowledge of the emirate of Crete and the causes of its fall in 960-961 CE.

**Keywords:** Emirate of Crete, Umayyad Spain, Ikhshīdīd Egypt, Maghrebīan Fatimids, 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī

## Introduction

In the year 960 the Byzantine general Nicephorus Phocas, in a massive sweeping thrust, landed on Crete unopposed by the Arabs who had occupied the island for almost one and a half centuries. The superb military preparedness of Nicephorus Phocas' expedition as well as the fierce resistance of the Arabs of Crete have been extensively discussed by a number of modern historians (Christides, 2017: 46-47). Information about the agonized attempts of the Arabs of Crete to secure aid from the other Muslim states is limited in the Arabic sources and is scarcely mentioned in the Byzantine sources. Actually, it is only the text of the Byzantine source Theophanes Continuatus which provides a relevant narrative describing how the Muslims used various ruses in order to gather information about Nicephorus Phocas' army (Theoph. Continuatus, 1838: 477) (for the validity of this author see Nickles 1937). Theophanes



Continuatus' narrative should not be dismissed as fictional since clandestine means to acquire such information, including commando operations, were common practice by the Byzantines and the Arabs (Koutrakou, 1995, 128; Koutrakou 1999-2000: 249; Haldon, 2013: 373). Theophanes Continuatus' *Chronographia* briefly reports that both the Umayyad Muslims of Spain and the Maghrebian Fatimids of North Africa sent spies to Crete who managed to enter Chandax secretly where they learned about Phocas' gigantic, fully equipped army as well as about its determination to conquer Crete (Theoph. Continuatus, 1838: 477). Nevertheless, the total refusal of the other Islamic states to assist the Arabs of Crete and the flight of part of the

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Arab population just before Phocas' army arrived have not been adequately discussed.

According to Theophanes Continuatus, when the spies returned to their countries and described the thorough preparation of Nicephorus Phocas' army and its impressive organization and resolute spirit, the Muslims leaders were terrified and refused to provide any assistance to the Muslims of Crete (Theoph. Continuatus, 1838: 477). The possibility that Muslim spies entered the port of Chandax to gather information about Nicephorus Phocas' invasion is logical. However, any alliance between Umayyad Spain and the Fatimids, as reported by Theophanes Continuatus, would have been rather impossible.

There is no doubt that a mutual distrust existed and an unbridged gap separated the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al- Raḥman III, called Nāṣir (emir 912-929; caliph 929-961), and the Fatimid Mu'izz (952-976), as it clearly appears in a lengthy correspondence between them described by Qādi al-Nu'mān (d.974). They insulted each other bitterly on the eve of Phocas' expedition to reconquer Crete in 960 (Yalaoui, 1978: 28-29). Nāṣir, in a letter to Mu'izz, boasted how prosperous Andalus was, how comfortably the inhabitants lived and how great their navy was (for the greatness of the Umayyad naval power during Nāṣir's time, see Lirola Delgado, 1993). In response Mu'izz accused him and his people of abusing their wealth and spending it on debauchery, drinking wine (strictly prohibited in the Koran), and mistreating women (Yalaoui, 1978: 28-29). The most offensive remark of all in Mu'izz's correspondence was that he and his countrymen were the only Muslims who applied Islam properly (Yalaoui, 1978: 33).

### **The inaction of the Islamic states at the time of the Byzantine reconquest of Crete (960-961 CE). *Jihād* and reality**

While this unbridgeable gap existed between the Magrebian Fatimids and the Umayyads of Spain, similarly an insoluble dispute remained between the Fatimids and the Ikshīdids (935-969), who nominally ruled Egypt. Actually, the government of Egypt was left in the hands of Kāfūr, an Ethiopian eunuch, who became its sole ruler from 966-968 (Hitti, 2002: 456-457). Notorious for his opulent entertaining and magnificent court (Christides, 1981: 110), Kāfūr was skillfully engaged in diplomatic activities and had tried to develop friendly relations on the one hand with Mu'izz, the caliph of the Fatimids, to whom he offered lavish gifts (Christides, 1981: 110-111) and on the other, with the Byzantines who had undertaken the reconquest of Crete (960-961). It was to Kāfūr that Mu'izz sent a letter proposing an alliance between the Ikshīdids of Egypt and the Fatimids in order to fight against the Byzantines.

In spite of the paucity of our sources, it is clear that such an alliance between the Ikshīdids of Egypt and the Maghrebian Fatimids was never achieved. The actual sincerity of Mu'izz's proposed alliance has been repeatedly questioned. The discussion is based mainly on a letter presented by Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, which has received conflicting interpretations. Mu'izz's proposal



to Kāfūr to conclude an Ikhshīdīd-Fatimid alliance in order to fight against the Byzantines and reconquer Crete is reproduced almost intact in Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's *Al-Majālis wa-l Masāyarāt* (Christides, 1981: the Arabic text, p. 108, and the English translation, p. 109-110). Mu'izz proposed an ambitious plan, almost impossible to be realized, i.e. to have a meeting of the Egyptian fleet with the Fatimid at a port on the coastline of Cyrenaica, not far from Crete, and from there their combined fleets would be launched against the Byzantines who had besieged Chandax, the capital of the Emirate of Crete.

The most interesting part of this nebulous proposal is that Mu'izz declared that this proposal was not simply a military plan, but a proclamation of maritime *jihād*, a holy war to assist the *umma* (Islamic nation). It should be noted that the naval *jihād* was especially appreciated by the Muslims who considered it more praiseworthy than the land *jihād* (Elmakias, 2018: 177). Mu'izz's proposal for *jihād* against the Byzantines has been considered by many scholars as simply Fatimid propaganda. Lev considers it an impractical pretentious effort to retain the image of the Fatimids as the champions of the holy war (Lev, 1995: 198). Tibi likewise remarks, 'The beleaguered Muslims of Crete could not honestly have expected any effective assistance from an impotent Ikhshīdīd Egypt, nor was al-Mu'izz prepared to put at risk his fleet in an unequal encounter with the much bigger Byzantine fleet engaged in the Cretan expedition.' (Tibi, 1991: 93). In contrast, Ballan regards Mu'izz's proposal in his letter as a sincere admonition to the Egyptians to assist the besieged Arabs of Crete, whom he considers '*mujāhidīn* (frontier warriors)'... '*ghāzī* warriors fighting from their island frontier ... on the front lines of *jihād* against the traditional enemies of the Arab Muslims, the Byzantines' (Ballan, 2015: 7).

Naturally, Mu'izz's proposal provided a new dimension to the conflict between the Fatimids and the Byzantines since it would transform their political war into a religious or holy war (*jihād*). The sincerity of Mu'izz's proposal is rather doubtful because any attempt to attack the formidable Byzantine army, which had been highly organized by Nicephorus Phocas, would require an expedition with numerous ships and thousands of well-trained soldiers. We should take into consideration that Mu'izz's appeal for maritime *jihād* would enhance the zeal of his followers because the maritime *jihād* was more important than the *jihād* on land and Muslims were encouraged to participate in naval combat. According to a number of *ḥadīths*, 'the combatants of the Muslim navy gain a double wage in their lives as they would do in their death' (Elmakias, 2018, 177; for the maritime *jihād*, see Lirola Delgado, 1995; Bonner, 2006; Cook, 2015). The fourteenth century Arab author Ibn al-Manqālī also reports that the martyrs at sea are more favored than the martyrs on land (Khalīlieh, 1988, 249).

The importance of the sincerity of Mu'izz's proclamation of *jihād* has been overemphasized without proper consideration of the Fatimids' actual naval preparedness to successfully undertake the organization of an expedition against Nicephorus Phocas. Dachraoui's over-optimistic view that, had the Fatimids and their allies undertaken the expedition to Crete, their success would have been inevitable cannot be readily accepted (Dachraoui, 1981, 247).

In general, the Fatimids' dynasty can be conveniently divided into two parts based on its territorial extension. The first part includes the period from 909 to 969, based exclusively on the Fatimids' presence in the Maghreb, and the second from the time of their conquest of Egypt (969) until sometime at the end of their dynasty. During the Maghrebian period of the Fatimids, their naval power was limited. It is only in the second period that the Fatimid navy acquired great strength (Hamblin, 1986; Bramoullé, 2007: 4-6) because of the new ports they had acquired and the ease of recruiting crews from the new areas where there were a large number of seamen (Bramoullé, 2007). Mu'izz, after his conquest of Egypt (969), undertook the construction of warships in the shipyards of Cairo and Alexandria (Fadel, 2001: 50). Obviously, the inadequate navy of the



Maghrebian Fatimids could not be substantially increased with any additional ships from Kāfūr's fleet whose limitation is clearly illustrated in a passage of Yaḥyā bn. Saʿīd al-Antaki, in which the inability of the Ikhshīdids to properly prepare even a single warship is described (for this passage and its translation see Christides, 2006:154-155). According to the present author's view, most probably, Mu'izz's proposal in his letter was not simply a device to project his image as the great Imam, protector of the *umma*, but perhaps a trap to lure and destroy the Ikhshīdid Egyptian fleet. Taking into consideration that the Fatimids had already attempted three times to conquer Egypt (Bianquis, 1998: 111), such a hypothesis should not be dismissed.

It should be noted that Mu'izz's deviousness towards the Ikhshīdids was not solely caused by his avid desire for expansion. It was also motivated by his belief that the Ikhshīdids were not real Muslims because they did not follow the proper Shī'ite version of Islam as understood by the Shī'ite Fatimids and therefore their destruction would be justified (Panadero, 2018: 394-397). Of course, Mu'izz, who claimed to be a champion of *jihād* (holy war), in reality violated its principal aim, according to which *jihād* was restricted only to war against the non-believers (Donner, 1991: 49).

### **The Muslims' Exodus from Crete and their Return to Dār al-Islām**

The refusal of the Islamic states to assist the besieged emirate of Crete undermined the confidence of the Muslims of Crete and led to their decision to organize the evacuation of part of their population from the capital Chandax while the bulk of them remained fiercely fighting the Byzantines until the siege forced their surrender.

The impact of the reconquest of Crete by Nicephorus Phocas, followed by a series of violent actions by the Byzantines, appears extensively in the Byzantine and Arabic sources, frequently altered and grossly exaggerated by some modern authors (for example, Kalaitzakis, 1984: 124-135), and is beyond the scope of this article. The best account of the actual historical details is presented in the work of Yaḥyā bn. Saʿīd al-Antaki, who is the most trustworthy author on Arab-Byzantine wars (Forsyth, 1977; Micheau, 1998). Yaḥyā bn. Saʿīd laconically describes the reaction of the people of Egypt when they learnt about the Byzantines' reconquest of Crete. In contrast to a number of Byzantine and Arabic sources which report that the Egyptians destroyed many churches and slaughtered a large number of Christians in Cairo and Alexandria, Yaḥyā informs us that only some churches were destroyed by a number of Egyptians of the lowest class, but he does not mention a slaughter of the Christians (Yaḥyā bn. Saʿīd al-Antakī, 1924, 780 [82]; English trans. Christides, 2006: 155). Moreover, Yaḥyā bn. Saʿīd adds that when the violence of the Egyptian mob intensified, a chief of the ruling Ikhshīdids rode into the throng leading soldiers to disperse the crowd and settle the riot (Yaḥyā bn. Saʿīd al-Antakī, 1924: 780 [82]).

Yaḥyā describes the revival of the Egyptian fleet after the Byzantines' reconquest of Crete in 961, which was apparently enriched by a number of warships from the remnants of the Muslim Cretan fleet carrying civilians fleeing from Phocas, but unfortunately he does not add other information (Christides, 2006: 160). Paradoxically, modern historians, who have used up too much ink wrestling over the problem of the exact date of the Muslims' conquest of Crete, never raised the question of the fate of the Muslim fleet of Crete after 961, so closely related to the fate of the Muslim inhabitants of Crete (Christides, 1984: 184-185 and note 177).

As expected, Nicephorus Phocas was well aware of the naval power of the emirate of Crete, so he ordered his troops to be extremely vigilant to avoid any surprise attacks by the Arabs (Christides, 2006: 160). However, the Arab defenders of Crete declined to engage in a full scale naval battle, apparently lacking sufficient strength. In any case, the fleet of the Emirate of Crete did not dare to attack Nicephorus Phocas' well-equipped navy, although some isolated skirmishes





could have taken place (Christides, 1984: 185). The Arab author ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al- Marrākushī (1949: 21) wrote that, instead of resisting, part of the Muslim population of Crete escaped on a number of Arab warships and sailed towards three areas of the Dār al-Islām, i.e. Alexandria, Sicily and Spain. It should be noted that only Panayotakis briefly mentions that part of the Muslim population of Crete abandoned the island, ‘La population musulmane quitta l’île ou bien fut rapidement christianisée’ (Panayotakis, 1960, 85). A fragment of the invaluable work of ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al- Marrākushī, *Al-Mu‘jib fī Talkhis Akhbār al-Maghrib*, is worth presenting here verbatim for the first time with the author’s English translation (Christides, 1984, 185, note 178). ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al- Marrākushī was an author of the 13<sup>th</sup> century but he drew his material from earlier sources, which are now lost.

**Arabic text of ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Marrākushī, *Al-Mu‘jib fī Talkhis Akhbār al-Maghrib*, p. 21.**

وأمر بنفي من بقي منهم عن البلاد، فخرجوا حتى نزلوا جزيرة إقريطش من جزائر البحر الرومي المقابلة لبر بركة أول المغرب، فلم يزلوا هنالك سنين إلى أن تفرقوا، فرجع بعضهم إلى الأندلس، واختار بعضهم سكنى صقلية، وانتقل بعضهم إلى الإسكندرية.

#### **Translation:**

And he [the emir Ḥakam] ordered the exile from the country of the rest [of the inhabitants of Rabaḍ in Andalusia] who survived, and they departed until they landed on the island of Crete, one of the islands of the Rūm [Roman] Sea, which is located parallel to Barqa, the beginning of Maghreb. And they settled there for many years until they were dispersed. And some of them returned to Andalusia, some chose to reside in Sicily, and some others relocated to Alexandria.

These three areas of the Dār al-Islām, which would provide security, were carefully selected by the Cretan Muslims. They arrived in Alexandria asking for refuge even before the arrival of Nicephorus Phocas in Chandax in 960. Although its trade position was already significant (Bramoullé, 2011: 88), Alexandria had not yet become an international trade center as it developed later after the Fatimids’ conquest of Egypt in 969. No doubt the Muslim refugees of Crete were easily sheltered and their ships were incorporated into the naval force of Ikhshīdīd Egypt. The refugees who chose to go to Sicily would also have had no difficulty settling there. Sicily was under the rule of the semi-independent dynasty of the Kalbites (Ahmad, 1975, 30), subordinate to the Fatimids, and therefore they would also have welcomed the refugees. Finally, it is a tragic irony that the last group of the refugees ended in Andalusia, the country from which their Andalusian ancestors had originally been expelled (for their odyssey, see Christides, 2017).

The decision to allow some of the Muslims of Crete to embark on warships and to send them to the countries of Dār al-Islām can be traced to the strategic spirit of the time applied by both Byzantines and Muslims. Thus, the Byzantine author Leo VI strongly urges the commander of a fleet to avoid any general engagement either with the whole of the naval fleet or with part of it unless it is absolutely necessary (Pryor & Jeffreys, 2006, Greek text 498, §36: χωρίς ανάγκης μεγάλης; English trans. 499). A similar reserved spirit is also advised by Ibn al-Manqali who suggested to the commander of an Islamic fleet that he should not engage his warship in actual fighting unless it was absolutely necessary (Ibn al-Manqali in Pryor & Jeffreys, 2006: 666, *darūra jittan* = absolute necessity). A good example of the disastrous effect of ignoring this rule can be drawn from the famous naval battle of Dhāt al-Sawāri (the Battle of the Masts) in ca 653, 654 or 655 CE (Christides, 2014; Christides, 2016). During this encounter, both Byzantines and Arabs unwisely engaged in a disastrous battle which ended in an immense slaughter leaving numerous bodies floating in the sea ‘turned red with blood’.



Although 'Abd al-Wāhid al-Marrākushi does not give a concrete date for the exodus of some of the Muslim civilians of Crete, we can assume that it took place shortly before Nicephorus Phocas' arrival in Crete in 960. The withdrawal of part of the Muslim fleet of Crete weakened its defense and must have had a terrible psychological effect on the morale of the defenders.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Several works have been written about the conquest of Crete by the Muslims (ca 825-826), which marks the loss of the naval hegemony of the Byzantines in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as about its reconquest by the Byzantine general Nicephorus Phocas in 961 and the Byzantines' recovery of their naval supremacy. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the fate of the Muslim population of Crete and to the last movements of the Muslim fleet of Crete which are closely related to the fate of the Muslims civilians of Crete just before and immediately after its reconquest by the Byzantines.

Nicephorus Phocas, anxiously alert to any potential aggression, ordered the concentration of his fleet in an unknown Cretan port, ready to confront any attacks by the warships of the Muslims of Crete. Obviously, such caution would not have been necessary if the naval power of the emirate of Crete consisted of pirate ships flying black flags, as it is asserted by a number of modern authors (see for example, Kalaitzakis, 1984: 54-55, 'ελαφρός...ληστοπειρατικός στόλος').

Concerning the commanders of the Muslim Cretan fleet, there is no mention of their names in Elmakias' list which includes only those of early Islam (Elmakias, 2018: 139-141) and we do not know the type and number of the warships which carried the civilians. We know, however, the name of the last emir of the emirate, i.e. 'Abd al- 'Azīz bn. Shu'ayb al-Qurṭubi, who was captured by the Byzantines in 961 (Christides, 2016b: 142). The Byzantine author Theodosius Diaconus calls him "Κουρουπᾶς" and describes him as an old bald man (Criscuolo, 1979, 15).

Our information about the warships of the Emirate of Crete could only be advanced by systematic underwater research within the framework of a general investigation of all Muslim archaeological finds, which is beyond the scope and the expertise of the present author, and also with a thorough reexamination of all relevant Arabic sources.

It should be remarked that while we have detailed knowledge of the construction of the Arab merchant ships, we hardly possess any information about the construction of the Arab warships and their weaponry. Frequent finds of shipwrecks of merchant ships, dated to ca. the seventh to eleventh century, cannot be identified with certainty whether they were Byzantine or Arab. Thus, a merchant ship wrecked at Serçe Limani, a protected bay on the southern coast of Turkey, could have been from either fleet (Van Doorninck, Jr., 2002; Christides, 2015: 168). In contrast, as is well known, intact sunken warships are a rarity because most of them were heavily damaged by enemy fire.

A few years ago, in the ancient port of Constantinople, a large number of shipwrecks, which are considered Byzantine, were discovered (Koçabas, 2008). They, nevertheless, do not provide us with any satisfactory, relevant information concerning warships. In any case, a continuous increasing number of studies, based on literary and iconographic evidence, have led to the conclusion that, in general, there was a close resemblance in the construction and efficiency of the Arab and Byzantine warships (Kolias, 1984; Makrypoulias, 2002: 187; Babuin, 2002: 35; Beihammer, 2002; Agius, 2008: 234-238; Livadas, 2009; Muhammad, 2009; Leontsini, 2017: 232-233; Gigourtakis, 2017: 65; Karapli, 2017; Klontza, forthcoming), but their systematic and detailed comparison has not been achieved yet.



## Muslims of Crete under the Byzantine Christian rulers

The question concerning the fate of the Muslim population of Crete after its reconquest by the Byzantines in 961 has been rarely studied by modern scholars whose interests focus solely on the fate of Christians under the Muslim rule (Lampsidis, 2007). No doubt, a huge Muslim population resided in Crete during its occupation by the Arabs (ca. 825/26-961). A few modern historians deal with the relations of the defeated Muslim population of Crete with the reestablished Byzantine Christian authorities. One extensive, but unsatisfactory discussion of the fate of the defeated Muslims of Crete, a number of whom were Christianized, has been written by Kalaitzakis (1984: 131-154; for a pioneering effort, see Christides, 2018, 4-5).

## Appendix

### Muslim marines and Christian oarsmen-sailors in the Arab warships of the middle tenth century

On the evidence of the Byzantine and Arabic sources, it is reasonable to conclude that both the average Byzantine warship, called *dromon*, and the Arab warship, known as *shīnī*, were well proportioned and had two decks (Christides, 2001, 30; Karaplı, 2007). Moreover, the Arabic sources reveal that in every Arab warship of the middle tenth century there was a strict separation between the lower bank in which the Christian oarsmen were placed, and the upper level where there were the Muslim marines – soldiers (Christides, 1982, 86). Unfortunately, in spite of the extensive relative articles of Bramoullé (2007, 2011), it has not been discovered for how long this separation continued to be practiced.

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