

Chapter 26

Romans, Egyptians, and the second Arab siege of Constantinople (717/18)

Phil Booth¹

In this chapter, I want to explore the question of Arab-conquered populations' continued commitment to inclusion in the East Roman empire with reference to a unique act of political subversion—the dramatic, perhaps decisive defection to the Romans of Egyptian sailors in the Arab fleet during the failed second siege of Constantinople in 717/18. It is unclear how far their defection might be mapped onto an abiding or resurgent ideological commitment to inclusion in the empire, as Arietta Papaconstantinou suggests for eighth-century western Thebes, where elites 'still lived in Byzantium—in the Byzantium their great-grandfathers had known.'² I will locate its more immediate impulse in the Arab conquerors' fiscal innovations, which had long encouraged resistance and which intensified in the build-up to the siege. But events at Constantinople further complicate the oft-repeated notion, which has its origins in contemporary texts, that the anti-Chalcedonian 'Copts' saw the 'Romans' as unambiguous aliens, heretics, and oppressors; the events also contextualize intensified attempts to implant this division in the aftermath of the failed siege.

The second siege

In 717/18, the caliphate mounted its most ambitious attempt to seize Constantinople. The massive siege by land and sea is witnessed in many narrative sources (notably Greek, Arabic,

¹ With thanks to Marek Jankowiak, Federico Morelli, Philip Wood, and Edward Zychowicz-Coghill for their comments, discussion, and references.

² A. Papaconstantinou, "'What Remains Behind': Hellenism and Romanitas in Christian Egypt after the Arab Conquest", *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, ed. H.M. Cotton et al. (Cambridge, 2009), 447–66 at 463.

Syriac, and Armenian),³ liturgical calendars,⁴ apocalypses,⁵ Arabic inscriptions,⁶ and other documents.⁷ While a reconstruction based on written sources has long existed,⁸ we lack a comprehensive account using all available materials.⁹ Our most important Greek source is embedded in Patriarch Nikephoros I's *Short History* (*Breviarium*) and Theophanes' *Chronicle*. It derives from a historiographical text covering 668 to 718 and culminates in the siege itself. Its author—sometimes identified with a certain Trajan *patrikios*—was a high-ranking official writing under Leo III (717–741), apparently a Constantinopolitan eyewitness to the siege.¹⁰

'Trajan' describes how the new emperor Anastasios II (713–715)¹¹ dispatches an ambassador to Caliph al-Walid I (705–715). Learning of preparations for a large land and sea expedition, Anastasios fortifies the City.¹² Word arrives of an Arab fleet from Alexandria collecting cypress wood for ship-building at Phoenix in Lycia. But the Roman fleet sent to burn their timber and equipment disperses when troops of the Opsikion rebel, triggering a brief civil war and the accession of a new emperor, Theodosios III, in late 715.¹³ Trajan's account now leaps over Theodosios' eighteen-month reign to the beginning of an Arab

³ For sources, see below nn. 10, 11, 20 (Greek); 19, 68, 82, 89 (Arabic); 14, 24, 68, 70 (Syriac); and 13 (Armenian).

⁴ C.G. Hatzidimitriou, 'Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum (August 16th) and the Arab Siege of Constantinople in 717 AD', *Byzantina* 12 (1983): 184–207; R.J. Olsen, 'The Last Arab Siege of Constantinople (717–718): A Neglected Source', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 60 (2020) 425–43; M. Lauxtermann, 'The Commemoration of the Siege of 717–718 in the Liturgical Calendar of Constantinople', *Constantinople: Queen of Cities*, ed. D. Smythe and S. Tougher (Leiden, forthcoming).

⁵ W. Brandes, 'Die Belagerung Konstantinopels 717/718 als apokalyptisches Ereignis. Zu einer Interpolation im griechischen Text der Pseudo-Methodios-Apokalypse', *Byzantina Mediterranea*, ed. K. Belke et al. (Vienna, 2007), 65–92.

⁶ F. Imbert, 'Graffiti arabes de Cnide et de Kos', *TM* 17 (2013): 731–58, esp. 733–40 (Knidos inscriptions C1 AH 98 (716/17) referring to an undeciphered expedition against the infidel (*ghazwa*) and C2–4 in the same church mentioning troops from Palestine), 746–8 (Kos inscription K1 AH 99 (717/18) and K2 in the same church referring to troops from Africa).

⁷ See below, [p. 00].

⁸ R. Guiland, 'L'Expedition de Maslama contre Constantinople (717–718)', in his *Études byzantines* (Paris, 1959), 109–33; M. Canard, 'Les Expéditions des Arabes contre Constantinople dans l'histoire et dans la légende', *Journal Asiatique* 208 (1926): 61–121; V. Christides, 'The Second Arab Siege of Constantinople (717–718?): Logistics and Naval Power', *Bibel, Byzanz und christlicher Orient*, ed. D.F. Bumazhnov et al. (Leuven, 2011), 511–32.

⁹ For revisionist treatment of the 'first' Arab siege: M. Jankowiak, 'The First Arab Siege of Constantinople', *TM* 17 (2013): 237–320.

¹⁰ On Trajan and his text: W. Treadgold, 'Trajan the Patrician, Nicephorus, and Theophanes', *Bibel, Byzanz und Christlicher Orient*, ed. D. Bumazhnov et al. (Leuven, 2011), 589–621; W. Treadgold, *The Middle Byzantine Historians* (Basingstoke, 2013), 8–17; and J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis* (Oxford, 2010), 256–60, 299–307 *contra* D. Afinogenov, 'The Source of Theophanes' *Chronography* and Nikephoros' *Breviarium* for the Years 685–717', *Khristianskii Vostok* n.s. 4 (2002): 11–22. See also S. Forrest, 'Theophanes' Byzantine Source for the Late Seventh and Early Eighth Centuries, c.AD 668–716', *TM* 19 (2015): 417–44 at 422–23, 438–39 (for hesitation over the sources' end point); Jankowiak, 'First Arab Siege', 249–56.

¹¹ Theoph.¹, 1:383; Theoph.², 533–4, 537 (appointed on Pentecost [4 June] 713).

¹² Nikeph. §49, 116–17; Theoph.¹, 1:384; Theoph.², 534–5.

¹³ Nikeph. §§50–1, 116–19; Theoph.¹, 1:385–6; Theoph.², 535–6.

campaign under Maslamas (Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik), Theodosios’ resignation, and the accession of Leo, a general of the Anatolikon.¹⁴ After the capture of Pergamon, probably in the winter of 716/17,¹⁵ the Arab land forces cross the Hellespont, march into Thrace,¹⁶ and by July or August 717 have besieged Constantinople.¹⁷ A fleet under Soliman (Sulayman)¹⁸ arrives soon afterwards—on 1 September, according to Theophanes; having lost some of its rearguard to the imperial galleys, it anchors at Sosthenios on the Bosphorus. The Arabs endure a hard and damaging winter,¹⁹ before the spring arrival of fleets from Egypt, under Sophiam (Sufyan), and from Africa, under Iezidos (Yazid), bearing reinforcements, arms, and provisions—manned, both Nicephorus and Theophanes imply, by Egyptian sailors.²⁰ The two new fleets anchor secretly along the Sea of Marmara’s Asiatic shore, up to the Gulf of Nicomedia. Then the unthinkable happens. The fleets’ Egyptian sailors desert by night, sail in skiffs to Constantinople, acclaim the emperor, and betray their fleets’ whereabouts, which the Romans duly devastate and plunder. This was a pivotal moment: soon after, on 15 August 718, the siege is lifted.²¹

Trajan’s narrative is notable for the role played by Alexandria and by Egyptians generally. In 715, it is an Alexandrian fleet which gathers timber for warships from Phoenix,

¹⁴ Nikeph. §52, 120–1; Theoph.¹, 1:538–41, who dates Leo’s accession to 25 March 717: *ibid.*, 572, and fills the gap with interactions between Leo and Maslama at Amorion via his ‘eastern source’: Theophilus of Edessa, *Chronicle*, trans. R.G. Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa’s Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge* (Liverpool, 2011), 209–15; E.W. Brooks, ‘The Campaign of 716–718, from Arabic Sources’, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 19 (1899): 19–31. Only one Armenian source mentions a large battle near the Sangarius in the year before the siege: Lewond, *History*, ed. K. Ezean, *Patmut’iwn Lewondeay meci vardapeti Hayoc* (St Petersburg, 1887), 19.

¹⁵ Nikeph. §53, 120–1; Theoph.¹, 1:390; Theoph.², 541. Two Syrian chronicles have Maslamas taking Pergamon, Sardis, and other towns in 715/16: *Chronicon ad 819*, in *Chron.1234*, 1:3–22 at 15; MS §11.18, 4:452. Christian chroniclers in Arab-ruled al-Andalus also record Pergamon’s conquest en route to Constantinople: *Corpus Scriptorum Muzarabicorum*, ed. J. Gil, 2 vols (Madrid, 1973), 1:13 (*Chronicle to 741* §38); 1:36 (*Chronicle to 754* §52); as does a Greek interpolation in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*: Brandes ‘Belagerung’.

¹⁶ MS §11.18, 4:453–4; *Chron.1234* §157, 1:302, where an Arab detachment under Sulayman (b. Ma‘adh) marches to Chalcedon.

¹⁷ For competing dates: Nikeph. §54, 122–3 (thirteen-month siege); Theoph.¹, 1:395; Theoph.², 545 (from 15 August 717).

¹⁸ Trajan may have confused this naval commander with Sulayman b. Ma‘adh, then caliph; Theophanes’ eastern source has Sulayman b. Ma‘adh and al-Bakhtari b. al-Hasan leading the land campaign, and ‘Umar b. Hubayra the fleet: Theophilus, *Chronicle*, ed. Hoyland, 209–15.

¹⁹ Nikeph. §54, 122–3 (lines 32–3: *hoi de en autois eispleontes Aigyptioi*); Theoph.¹, 1:397 (lines 5–6: *hoi de ton duo stolon touton Aigyptioi*); Theoph.², 546.

²⁰ Both otherwise unknown. In his lost *Ta’rikh*, the Egyptian scholar al-Layth b. Sa’d (d. 791) identifies African and Egyptian fleets, under Ibn Abi Burda and Shurayh b. Maymun respectively, distinguishing these from the ‘first ships’ of the *ahl al-maidna* (‘people from Medina’) under ‘Umar b. Hubayra and Abu ‘Ubayda: al-Layth b. Sa’d, *Ta’rikh*, in E. Zychowicz-Coghill, *The First Arabic Annals: Fragments of Umayyad History* (Berlin, 2021), 99.

²¹ Nikeph. §56, 124–7; Theoph.¹, 1:399; Theoph.², 550. On the date (the Feast of the Assumption) see Germanos, ‘On the Deliverance of Constantinople’ §19, ed. V. Grumel, ‘Homélie de saint Germain sur la délivrance de Constantinople’, *REB* 16 (1958): 183–205 at 196–7; also the liturgical texts in n. 00 above.

presumably successfully; in 717, the main fleet, origins unstated, reaches Constantinople; and in 718, two further fleets bear reinforcements from Egypt and Africa.²² Trajan sees the desertion of the Egyptian crews as pivotal to the siege's failure, although other sources such as the lost chronicle of Dionysios of Tel Mahre do not mention it. Despite extensive evidence and access to a unique, possibly Roman source containing precise information on Arab movements, it mentions only the presence of Egyptian sailors (*malahe 'iguptaye*), but not their desertion,²³ instead emphasizing the role of the Bulgars, allied to Leo, in harassing and depleting the Arab forces.²⁴ We might therefore suspect that Trajan fabricated the crews' defection, perhaps to assure his readership of the continued attractions of life within the Roman empire, highlighting the latent loyalties of Christians within its former territories. But such suspicion is mitigated by viewing the siege from the perspective of a source rather neglected by Byzantinists: the Egyptian papyrological record.²⁵

The *kourson* of the sea

The siege falls within the timeframe of the most important cache of documents extant from eighth-century Egypt. Discovered at Kom Ishqaw (ancient Aphrodito) in 1901, this archive consists of over four hundred documents in Greek, Coptic, and Arabic,²⁶ dating from 698 to 722. They come from the pagarch's office—the notable responsible for local tax-collecting, a role established by the East Romans and continued under early Arab rule—and in particular from a certain Basil. The documents are mixed, but generally fiscal. Many are official letters or orders (*entagia*) from, or declarations sent to, the Arab governor. In most, that governor is Qurra b. Sharik (709–15), and some even bear a *bulla* (seal) with his emblem, possibly a wolf.²⁷ Hence the modern, but misleading, name: the 'Qurra archive'.

²² This African fleet is perhaps also attested in the Arabic inscription from Kos (Imbert, 'Graffiti arabes', 747–8, K2), referring to the *ahl ifriqiyya* among others dated to August/September (716) and AH 99 (717/18).

²³ MS §11.18, 4:455; *Chron.1234* §159, 1:304.

²⁴ Now embedded in MS §11.18, 4:452–5 (acknowledging dependence on Dionysios in the heading); *Chron.1234*, §§157–61, 1:300–7. On the Bulgars' role: V.T. Gjuzelev, 'La participation des Bulgares à l'échec du siege arabe de Constantinople en 717–718', *Études historiques* (Sofia) 10 (1980): 91–113; D. Mishin, 'Les récits des auteurs musulmans sur l'expédition arabe de 716–718 contre Constantinople et "la ville des Slaves"', *BSI* 57 (1996): 265–77; P.A. Yannopoulos, 'Le rôle des Bulgares dans la guerre arabo-byzantine de 717–718', *Byz* 67 (1997): 483–516.

²⁵ One important exception known to me is F.R. Trombley, 'Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa' and the Christians of Umayyad Egypt', *Papyrology and the History of Early Islamic Egypt*, ed. P. Sijpesteijn and L. Sundelin (Leiden, 2004), 199–226 esp. 203–4, 207–8 (although without the explicit links suggested below).

²⁶ Main publications: *P.Lond.4* 1332–1646; *P.Ross.Georg.4*; *SB.10* 10453–60; *CPR.3* 25, 52–64, 85; *P.Heid.Arab.1*; *P.BeckerPAF*; *P.BeckerNPAF*; *The Kurrah Papyri from Aphrodito in the Oriental Institute*, ed. N. Abbott (Chicago, 1938); *P.Cair.Arab.3* 146–66; *Koptskie teksty Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha*, ed. P.V. Ernshtedt [Jernstedt] (Leningrad, 1959), nos 18–38.

²⁷ See e.g. *P.Lond.4* 1346, 1374; *P.Ross.Georg.4* 2, 4.

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