

Byzantine Conflicts with Islam

The earliest conflicts between the Byzantine Empire and the burgeoning Islamic state were at first seemingly benign border skirmishes. This was something which had been the *modus operandi* for those Byzantine citizens on the eastern edges of imperial control since the establishment of Syria as a Roman province in 64 BC. When the *Ridda* (Wars of Apostacy) had been successfully quelled (AD 633) in the Arabian Peninsula by the second caliph Abu Bakr (632-634), Muslims began to push northward and to test the strength of the borders of both the Persian and Byzantine Empires. A series of raids against Byzantine-allied Arab tribes, most notably the Banu Ghassan, was likely meant to probe Roman response times and the power of their allies. When the porousness of the border had become inescapably apparent, armies were sent against both the Persian and Byzantine frontiers. Diplomacy proved to be one of the most potent weapons, as the incoming Muslims were able to draw on old cultural parallels as well as offer enticing promises to disgruntled allies of the empires. As the Arabs were able to peel away many of the tribes who had historically secured the borders of each superpower, they widened a strategic gap which had been greatly exacerbated by the final Romano-Persian War (602-628). The famous battles at Yarmuk and al-Qadisiyyah, both in 636, dealt irreparable damage to the ancient empires. Persia would never recover, being almost entirely conquered under the banner of Islam by 651. The Byzantines would lose the most profitable provinces of the empire and never again achieve parity with their sixth-century level of economic prosperity. Although they would not be utterly destroyed as had been the Persians, the eastern borders of the Byzantine empire would be contained mostly along the Taurus mountains in south eastern Anatolia by 650.

After the first century of drastic expansion stretching from the Hindu Kush to the coasts of the Atlantic Ocean, the Islamic empire settled into a prolonged war of attrition with the

Byzantines. While for a time the Muslims would hold Anatolia, bringing the Byzantine capital city of Constantinople itself under siege from 674-678, their hold would not last long. The imperial capital would come under attack once again from 717-718, at the height of Umayyad ascendancy and power, all while enemies from without surrounded the rest of the empire. Despite the dire situation, the Byzantines were able to hold off the invaders. Anatolia would become the primary battle ground for the Muslim and Byzantine empires even past the *de facto* dissolution of the Abbasid caliphate in 950. From the first Islamic invasions in the seventh century to the tenth century renaissance of Byzantine potency, the Eastern Roman Empire would turn inward and reform its military, economy, and social structures. Those two and a half centuries were spent in defense of what little could be retained. The Lombards pushed the Byzantines out of Italy by the middle of the eighth century, and Muslims pushed them out of Sicily in the later half of the ninth century. Repeated invasions of Central Asian nomads saw the loss of much of the Balkan territories which had, to that point, filled out the majority of the Byzantine rank and file. It would not be until the end of the ninth century that Byzantium made any significant advances on their lost territories.

The Emirate of Melitene would prove a watershed for Byzantine successes in the east. Their depredations had long rendered Byzantine Anatolia destitute and anxious, and because of their alliance with the Cilician Armenians, they were nearly impossible for Byzantium to rout while so many forces were tied up in campaigns to the north and west. However, the destruction of the emirate by Emperor Romanos Lekapenoi (r. 920-944) began the change of Byzantine fortunes indicative of the tenth century. With the raids of the emirate put to an end, farms were able to rebuild and some trade was established with the Armenians to the east. Prosperity began to spread across Anatolia, which would give Byzantium the security it would need to push back

on the Islamic world. The defeat of Melitene paved the way for the subjugation of Edessa in 943 and Crete was delivered into Byzantine hands by 961.

Arguably, the most famous Byzantine success of the tenth century was seen under the reign of Basil II (r. 976-1025). Early in his reign, he campaigned in Syria against the Fatimid caliphate in 987, gaining a truce lasting nearly a decade and recognition of Basil's status as protector of Christians in the Fatimid realm. He then used the peace with the Fatimids to conquer the Bulgarian khanate in Thrace from a preliminary expedition in 986 through the penultimate defeat of Khan Samuel at the battle of Kleidion (1014). He was able to annex eastern Armenia and push back on the Lombards in southern Italy (1021). Basil's political and strategic focus clearly faced westward, as his policies favored military action in Italy and the Balkans. This westward focus was partly made possible because his reign saw generally peaceful relations with the Islamic powers to the east, although this was not universally favorable to his nobles.

The final period of recognizably "Byzantine" conflict with the Islamic world came under the Komnenian dynasty. They were closely tied with the early crusading movement, having made the initial call for military aid from western Europe in response to a long and destructive war with the Seljuk Turks in Anatolia in the latter decades of the eleventh century. This conflict prompted Alexios Komnenos to reach out to Pope Urban II for help through letters, embassies, and the attendance of his ambassadors at the Councils of Piacenza and Clermont in 1095. It was at Clermont that Urban responded with his famous address calling for what would later become known as the First Crusade. Although the Komnenian dynasty did not overturn complete Islamic control of Anatolia as Basil II had done, they did, at least, reassert control over much of the region, including important cities like Nicaea and Dorylaeum, as a result of the First Crusade. The Komnenian restoration also saw reforms to the military, economy, and some additional

territorial gains. While the social and economic gains would remain, the territorial gains were quite ephemeral, thanks in no small part to the growing threat of the Normans. From the end of the Komnenian dynasty, the Byzantine Empire was largely relegated to Greece and would only see further declines in the following centuries. The depredations of the Fourth Crusade both reflected and accelerated the empire's decline as it further diminished its capacities for resisting Islamic incursions. By the fifteenth Century, the Ottoman Turks had made irreversible advances into Byzantine territory, resulting in the final conquest of Constantinople in 1453, effectively ending the long history of the empire.

See Also:

Further Reading:

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