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Yarmouk – The Necessity of Studying the Battle in Early Medieval Military Historiography

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One hardly needs to cite the Arab conquests of the 7th to the 8th centuries as one of the pivotal moments of Western Civilization. Indeed, as most scholars tend to surmise, the Battle (or skirmish) at Tours saved Europe from Arab[1] domination.[2] However, one should also rightfully acknowledge the Byzantium Empire[3] as a bulwark against caliphates and sultanates in not just one battle but for over eight hundred years (633 – 1453).[4] And just like Tours, another encounter became a pivotal moment for Western Civilization. If this battle had a different outcome, then Islam might have become more of an Eastern religion like Buddhism or Hinduism. Yet the Battle of Yarmouk (636) is instructional in also the annals of military history since it pitted an experienced, well equipped and combat integrated army, with an established doctrine, against what can be called, rather simplistically, an outnumbered bunch of ill-equipped

[1] The term "Arab" has been used here more often than "Muslim" since the latter can be employed too simplistically to denote entire cultures that are not Arabian yet are often lumped together with Arabs. Thus "Arab" should not necessarily equate to "Muslim" nor vice versa.

[2] There are several works that talk about the significance of the battle. One of the earliest is Edward Creasy, *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1915).

[3] "Byzantium" and "Greek" are used here interchangeably because of the Greek centre and culture of the Empire.

[4] 633 marking the initial Arab forays with 1453 marking the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks.

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nomads. Yet the latter won thus establishing superior generalship can counter even the otherwise most adept of armies.

Arther Ferrill in *The Origins of War* points out the usefulness of a "tactically integrated army" - a feature that "laid the foundation and shaped the practice of modern warfare down to even the time of Napoleon."[5] Ferrill accordingly lays out the explicit and implicit criteria for an effective pre-modern army. Light cavalry and infantry would be deployed as a protective screen and to threaten flanks with missile weapons and their mobility. Furthermore they would be used to chase down fleeing elements of the enemy. In the main battle, the heavy cavalry would constitute the "hammer" with which to crush the enemy against the "anvil" of heavy infantry.[6] This method was employed in several of Alexander the Great's battles; yet the combination of heavy cavalry, light cavalry, heavy infantry and light infantry/skirmishers stayed flexible enough to be deployed in several modes.[7] Implicit in all of these calculations was the necessity for an effective logistics branch, discipline, an intelligence service and of course, generalship.[8] These components thus formed the basis of an integrated army. However, such an institution did not always equate to a victorious army and sometimes just one prevailing factor in a military could negate all others – especially in the pre-modern era. Such was the case in the Arab Byzantine War of the 7th century.

Starting from the middle of the 7th century, after Islam had consolidated its hold in the Arabian Peninsula, Arab armies spread through the ancient established empires of Rome and Persia, bringing the former to its knees and utterly vanquishing the latter. Like the Hunnic invasions before and the Mongol conquests after, the rapid success of these nomadic folk have ever since excited much discussion and comment. As Edward Gibbon comments:

> In the victorious days of the Roman Republic, it had been the aim of the senate to confine the legions to a single war and completely to suppress a first enemy before they provoked the hostilities of a second. These timid maxims were disdained by the magnanimity and enthusiasm of the Arab

[5] Arther Ferrill, *The Origins of War* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), p. 7.
[6] Ibid., p. 216.
[7] Ibid., p. 149.
[8] Ibid., pp. 180-186.

> caliphs. With the same vigour and success they invaded the successors of Augustus and those of Artaxerxes; and the rival monarchies at the same instant became the prey of an enemy whom they had been so long accustomed to despise.[9]

Indeed, given the sophistication and military prowess of the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires at that time, one might be forgiven for underestimating the chances of success for the Rashidun Caliphate.[10]

Of course, the Sassanian military, it could be argued, was a less integrated army compared to the Byzantines. Primary focus was on heavy cavalry staffed entirely by the nobility. Indeed, these well armoured horsemen could be considered the forerunner of the medieval European knight with their equipment and their upbringing.[11] Covered from head to toe with plate, scale or mail and sporting a wide assortment of weapons such as swords, maces and bows and arrows, these cavalry units were the shock formations of the Persian Empire. Even the horses were armoured as well. Complementing these troops would be war elephants. These served primarily to puncture enemy lines leaving gaps to be exploited by heavy cavalry. Of secondary importance was their role as archery platforms enabling bowmen a substantial vantage point to fire at the enemy.[12] The weakest part of the Sassanian Army consisted of the medium-light cavalry and the infantry. These would be supplied by barbarian or semi-civilized peoples on the fringes of the Empire and it was not surprising to find Arabs fighting for the Sassanids against other Arabs.[13] The core of the infantry consisted of levees of poorly trained under-equipped and lightly armoured peasants. They were a few formations of elite archers but for the most part, the Sassanids did not employ any heavy infantry since they could not stand up to Greek footmen.[14] When campaigning

[9] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. William Smith (New York: Harper, 1857), p. 471.
[10] The Rashidun Caliphate (632 – 661) comprised the first Arabian dynasty of the conquests followed by the Umayyad and Abbasid. Interestingly enough, the Caliphs in this period were elected and the post was not hereditary.
[11] Kaveh Farrokh, *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642* (Oxford: Osprey, 2005), p. 5.
[12] Kaveh Farrokh, *Shadows in the Desert* (Oxford: Osprey, 2007), p. 201.
[13] Ibid., p. 199.
[14] Ibid., p. 201.

against the more integrated armies of their Byzantine adversaries, the Sassanians employed strength of numbers, deception, sieges and internal turmoil to best them.[15]

In contrast to the Sassanians, the Byzantine Army of the 7th century had a more integrated and balanced army which was not lacking in numbers. During that time the regular army consisted of nearly 150,000 men[16] who were paid and equipped by several industries and an efficient tax system.[17] It was only after the Arabian debacle that the Empire adopted the quasi-feudal *themata* system where soldiers had to provide for themselves from their land allotments.[18] The core of the 7th century army (like the ones before and after it) consisted of the *cataphract* or heavy cavalry. Due to the continuous pressures on almost every border of the Empire, the army had to invest in a mobile force which could be at home in the rugged terrain of the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor as well as the plains of Syria and North Africa. The result was an armoured behemoth which had both melee and ranged power – not unlike tanks of today. Trained to "shoot rapidly mounted on his horse at a run"[19] he could also charge while wielding a lance. The presence of stirrups made this charge far more potent when compared to the Hellenic era cavalry.[20] Covered head to toe in a mixture of chain, plate and scale armour he could fend off most blows while retaliating with mace or sword.[21] Even his mounts had "protective pieces of iron about their heads and breast plates of iron."[22]

Following Sassanian customs, the Byzantine army relied on their allies and tributaries to provide light cavalry. Avars, Bulgars, Armenians, Georgians and Arabs supplied mounted skirmishers depending on the theatre of operations. For the Levant, the Greeks relied on the Ghassanids, a Christian Arab tribe based towards the north of

[15] There are a few works that detail the encounters between the Byzantines and Sassanians. For further details please consult Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[16] Warren Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 64.
[17] Ibid., pp. 179-86.
[18] Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 348.
[19] Maurice, *Maurice's Strategikon*, trans. George T. Dennis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), p. 139.
[20] Ibid., p. 144.
[21] John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 14.
[22] Maurice, *Strategikon*, p. 12.

Arabia, which supplied both cavalry and infantry.[23] However, these auxiliaries were not engaged in the front but rather in picketing, scouting, ambushing and screening. The volatile nature of the region and constant tribal rivalries with their nemesis on the Persian side - the Lakhmids - honed the Ghassanid skill in warfare. Combined with Byzantine subsidies, these northern Arabs provided their overlords with a much needed mobile desert force.

The Byzantine foot soldier requires mention as well. Since the cavalry could be rapidly deployed when necessary, the infantry often served as static garrisons which nevertheless afforded a ready pool of soldiers to be integrated with the cavalry whenever on campaign. It was, however, an important part of the army and not necessarily "inferior" as historian Charles Oman posits[24] - especially when compared to Arab or Sassanian infantry. The core of the heavy infantry consisted of men equipped with spears, shields, swords, helmets and mail.[25] According to standard Greek doctrine they pinned down the enemy while allowing the cavalry to seek advantage of unguarded flanks or gaps or served as a screen to allow mounted troops to conduct an orderly withdrawal.[26] Light infantry complemented their heavier brethren by providing ranged support in the form of javelins and arrows. Furthermore, they were trained to operate independently or coordinate with their mounted counterparts. All the branches of the Byzantine army supplemented this rigorous training with experience codified throughout the centuries. One such example would be the *Strategikon of Maurice*.

A late 6th century military manual, the *Strategikon* instructed Greek generals in the myriad ways to conduct a campaign against both external and internal foes of the Empire. Often attributed to the Emperor Maurice (582 – 602), this handbook consists of twelve chapters dealing with cavalry and infantry tactics – autonomous or integrated – along with siegecraft, training and logistics. It also inculcated a political insight within the strategist especially when it came to foreign auxiliaries who could falter in their loyalties.[27] In battle also the *Strategikon* proved to be ahead of its time. It demanded a reserve since "to hold nothing in reserve for various eventualities in case of a reverse is

[23] Ibid., p. 13.
[24] C. W. C Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1885), p. 42.
[25] David Nicolle, *Yarmuk 636 AD* (London: Osprey, 1994), p. 31.
[26] Maurice, *Strategikon*, p. 15.
[27] Ibid., pp. 113-26.

the mark of an inexperienced and absolutely reckless man" for if the army "should be outflanked or unexpectedly attacked by the enemy, and it has no support from its rear or flanks, without any protection or reserve force, it will be forced to retire in headlong flight."[28] Thus, two lines became the norm with the front one being primarily engaged in assault and posted more to the flanks in open order while the second one in the centre stayed in close formation.[29] During an engagement, the flanks would drive forward to test and then penetrate the enemy lines while the centre, which had to be mobile and quick enough to relatively keep up with the vanguard, fixed the enemy in place as well as providing a screen when necessary.[30] Furthermore, horsemen came to be grouped into small units (*tagma*) which could be capable of independent action or being chained together into larger formations.[31] Both the cavalry and infantry were ably supported by skirmishers units posted to the flanks which harassed their opponents through ambuscades.[32] Thus, the Byzantine army seemed quite capable and educated at the doctrinal level and thus more than a match for their Arab adversaries.

Who were these Arab warriors then? In contrast to the wealth of information about the later Umayyad and Abbasid armies, not much has been written about the military of the Rashidun Caliphate.[33] It could be that there was not much to write about in the first place. Unlike their successors, the Rashidun armies did not have much material to equip themselves with. Armour was so scarce that even as late as 704, an army of 50,000 would have no more than 350 coats of mail.[34] Small wonder that both armour and weapons came to be praised in poetry[35] and were passed down from one generation to another even if they were centuries old.[36] Unlike the Persian and Greek empires, the Arabs of the Rashidun Caliphate did not have an arms manufacturing industry and had to either import their equipment from places as far away as India[37]

[28] Ibid., p. 23.
[29] Ibid., pp. 26, 76.
[30] Ibid., pp. 15, 24.
[31] Ibid., p. 38.
[32] Ibid., p. 27.
[33] Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs* (NewYork: Routledge, 2001), p. 168.
[34] Ibid., p. 169.
[35] Ibid., p. 168.
[36] Ibid., p. 169.
[37] Ibid., p. 173.

(which was prohibitively expensive and could be afforded by only the wealthy) or equip themselves from spoils of battle.[38] The bulk of the Rashidun army consisted of spear wielding infantry and bowmen. These spears would be often tipped with cow horn instead of metal.[39] Arrowheads might be made from flint. Thus, the penetrating power of these projectiles could be questionable especially when encountering well armoured Greek infantry and cavalry.[40] The Rashidun army therefore, did not possess any technological superiority over their opponents.

What advantages did these Arabs have then? Azar Gat in *War in Human Civilization* puts forward the theory that nomadic peoples (which include Arabs) profited from a greater mobility, because of their use of horses, which enabled them to "eschew direct confrontation if they so wished, because there was nothing that they were forced to stand up and defend."[41] Indeed, the non-sedentary Arabs may have benefited from certain advantages since the "nomadic life of long-range movements in the open and activities of herding and hunting were the closest simulation of real campaigning. Furthermore, endemic conflict existed between the nomadic tribal hosts over pastureland, water and animal stock, making warfare a life-long habit for them."[42] Such was the training imparted to the Huns and Mongols.[43] Yet Gat makes an exception for the Rashidun Arabs:

> In arid Arabia cavalry forces were impractical. It was the solid infantry forces raised from the townsfolk of Mecca, Medina, and the other caravan city-states of south-west Arabia that constituted the backbone of early Islamic armies. . . . The camel was the main riding animal, which provided strategic mobility over long distances and from which the riders dismounted to fight on foot. In both of the decisive battles of Yarmuk in Trans-Jordan (AD 636) and al-Qadisiyya in Iraq (AD 637), against the armies of the Byzantine and Persian empires respectively, the invading Moslems (sic) took up strong defensive positions[44] Indeed, most of the early battles took place around roads thus negating the assumption that

[38] Nicolle, *Yarmuk,* p. 40.
[39] Ibid., p. 37.
[40] David Nicolle, *The Great Islamic Conquests AD 632–750* (Oxford: Osprey, 2009), p. 29.
[41] Gat, *Human Civilization*, p. 379.
[42] Ibid., p. 378.
[43] Hugh Kennedy, *Mongols, Huns and Vikings* (London: Cassell, 2002), pp. 29, 112, 114.
[44] Gat, *Human Civilization*, pp. 293-94.

> "the highly mobile Arabs were uninterested in traditional arteries of communication."[45]

The Rashidun Caliphate did not possess much of an advantage in their military organization. As Gat pointed out, the core of their armies consisted of infantry from the cities while the more nomadic Bedouin provided light cavalry.[46] In contrast to the massive Greek and Persian militaries in the 7th century, the Rashidun armies probably numbered less than 60,000.[47] Thus, unlike the pressure from barbarian migrations of the 4th to 5th centuries which brought down the Western Roman Empire, the Rashidun conquest was based on armies and not the movement of hordes of families or clans.[48] To be sure, married women did follow their partners on campaign but their roles tended to be functional since they could rally disheartened soldiers and dispatch wounded foes.[49] Men were grouped according to their tribes which fostered a sense of *esprit de corps* but at the same time provided other problems for commanders. The loyalty of contingents not from cities were always suspect since their profession of Islam was deemed to be skin-deep. Therefore command over these groups devolved upon the sedentary elite whose loyalties could not be questioned. The internal cohesion of the Rashidun armies was far from harmonious.[50] Coupled with this was the lack of any formal pay structure. Arab soldiers were funded and supplied almost entirely by foraging or, more importantly, battlefield loot.[51] One can just imagine the quarrels that would have broken out regarding division of spoils.

What the Rashidun military excelled at was their leadership at both strategic and tactical levels. Fighting wars with both Byzantium and Persia at the same time would have been costly in human lives if not anything else. Yet the Arab invasion was timed to coincide with the end of the Byzantine–Sassanian War of 602–628 which had started with the Persian Emperor Khosrau II capitalizing on political turmoil[52] within the

[45] Nicolle, *Yarmouk*, p. 35.
[46] Ibid., p. 32.
[47] Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 221.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., p. 222.
[50] Ibid., p. 225.
[51] Ibid., p. 226.
[52] Farrokh, *Shadows*, pp. 250-1.

Eastern Roman Empire leading to the rapid conquest of the Byzantine provinces of Syria and Egypt. However, the acclamation of a capable Greek Emperor, Heraclius, led to a reversal of Persian fortunes. After quelling political unrest in Constantinople and utilizing a Byzantine army modelled on the *Strategikon*, Heraclius (despite initial setbacks) managed to take the war into the heart of the Persian Empire and forced it to sue for a very harsh peace. The peace involved the restoration of all Byzantine territories, the payment of an immense war indemnity and the return of all prisoners and treasures.[53] Thus, by 628, both Empires had just concluded a brutal war. It was shortly after in 633 that the Rashidun Caliphate struck, initially carrying out raids to test Imperial defences. Yet it must be taken into account that the Byzantine Empire suffered the least from the previous war. Its provinces had been restored. Their coffers had been refilled with treasure. Furthermore, the army had been strengthened. Its morale had received a boost because of recent victories and at the helm it had Heraclius "a man with a vast amount of military experience, well used to the hardships of campaign. He was also at the height of his powers . . . as the earliest Muslim raids on Syria began."[54] Not to mention it was one of the finest tactically integrated and equipped militaries of that period – as detailed above. Thus taking such factors into account it would have made sense if the Rashidun armies could not penetrate into Byzantine territory.

Leaving aside the strategic angle, the tactical leadership of the Arabs contributed the most to their successes. In Khalid ibn al-Walid, the Rashidun Caliphate had a tactical genius who, despite the numerous shortcomings of the Arab armies, could defeat the military might of both Byzantium and Persia. Yet this same man could have put an end to Islam for Khalid was not an early convert to Islam. In 610 when the Prophet Muhammad started preaching Islam in Arabia, he encountered severe opposition from his kinsmen and fellow citizens of Mecca. This prompted him and his followers to seek refuge in the nearby sympathetic city of Medina. Khalid belonged to this group which oppressed the early Muslims. At the Battle of Uhud (625) in Arabia, 700 Muslims from Medina faced a 3000 strong Meccan army with Khalid in charge of 200 Meccan horsemen. Despite the imbalance of forces, the Muslim infantry pushed back their opponents and the Muslim archers blunted a cavalry charge. At this point, believing the day won, the Muslims soldiers broke formation and started looting.

[53] Ibid., p. 262.

[54] Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests* (Philadelphia: Capo, 2007), p. 74.

Khalid instantly perceived an advantage. In a move characteristic of his later battles, he led his horsemen around the left flank of the Muslim line and attacked them from the rear. The Muslim army collapsed. Khalid's rally came literally within a finger's breadth of killing the Prophet.[55] Only a spirited recovery and rally from the Muslim commanders allowed the remains of their army to seek shelter in Mount Uhud. Thus, Khalid won his first battle against men who would soon become his comrades – not to mention two future Caliphs who would be his commanders in chief.[56]

In 629, Khalid converted to Islam and became a valuable Muslim commander. Interestingly enough, his first foray as part of a Muslim army was against the Byzantines and their allies the Ghassanid Arabs. In 629, an Arab[57] punitive expedition encountered a Byzantine host at Mota on the borders of Arabia and the Empire. Despite being outnumbered, the Arab army fought furiously with the Arab commander and his deputies losing their lives. At that point, the invaders morale started wavering. But Khalid – then serving in the ranks as a simple cavalry man – took charge and managed to effect an orderly retreat from the field. The Byzantines, being severely mauled, did not further pursue. For his coolness in the heat of battle, Khalid was awarded the title, Sword of God.[58]

In 632, following the death of the Prophet, Khalid became engaged in conquering the rest of the peninsula and putting down rebellions. His decisiveness at Mota had further established his credentials and in 633 he spearheaded the invasion of Persia. Towards the end of the year, he force-marched 500 men through 500 kilometres of desert, without any water sources in their path, to join up with Arab forces in Syria – a feat which still astounds historians today.[59] While the Rashidun army did not always

[55] John Bagot Glubb, *The Great Arab Conquests* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 72. A bodyguard lost a few fingers deflecting a sword slash meant for the Prophet.
[56] There are many 20th century histories, based on primary documents that deal with the events of the Battle of Uhud. This paper makes use of Glubb's account.
[57] With the conquest of Mecca in 630, the rest of the Arabian peninsula fell rapidly under the sway of Islam. Thus, by 633 the invading armies were not just Muslim but they were also of a single ethnicity – Arabian.
[58] A. I. Akram, *Khalid Bin Al-Waleed* (New Delhi: Adam, 2011), p. 41.
[59] Donner, *Islamic Conquests*, pp. 119 – 26.

engage in guerrilla[60] or nomadic type warfare (despite their control of the desert) it still managed to use knowledge of barren wastelands to maintain unconventional lines of transport and communication. This allowed the Caliph back in Medina to coordinate his armies in the field thousands of kilometres away.[61] It was definitely this Bedouin knowledge that enabled Khalid to make the otherwise dangerous crossing. In the Levant he skirmished with several Byzantine armies before fighting the Battle of Ajnadayn. This encounter, a decisive Arab victory, was followed by Khalid's siege and capture of Damascus – a major feat since the Rashidun army did not have any knowledge of siegecraft. But Khalid's successes had aroused the interest of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius who came to Syria, with a large force, to personally oversee operations. Temporarily giving up their gains, the Arab army retreated to the plain bounded by the Yarmouk River and waited for their opponents. There in August 636 the decisive Battle of Yarmouk was fought.

Unfortunately, the historiography surrounding these battles can be problematic, thus negating a true appreciation for these events. As John Jandora points out:

> The encounter at the Yarmouk thus deserves to be ranked among the most important battles of World History. Despite its significance, however, the battle has yet to be analyzed from a military perspective. Military historians have neglected it, while Orientalists have been frustrated by the fragmentary and inconsistent nature of the sources. It is not plausible, however, that religious fervour along could have stopped the Byzantine heavy cavalry. The Arabs must have had some military advantage.[62]

It is not only the encounter at Yarmouk that suffers from a gap in the historiography. Earlier battles such as one of Khalid's finest victories – the Battle of Walaja – have not garnered notice in several histories of the Arab conquests. Foremost of these accounts is Lieutenant–General Sir John Bagot Glubb's *The Great Arab Conquests*. As leader of the Arab Legion from 1939 – 1956 and successor in the desert of T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), Glubb had years of military experience and access to

[60] On the other hand, Byzantine forces had centuries of guerrilla warfare experience against the Persians which they employed against the victorious Arabs. David Nicolle, *Romano-Byzantine Armies 4th - 9th Centuries* (London: Osprey, 1992), p. 12.
[61] Ibid., p. 127.
[62] John W. Jandora, "The Battle of the Yarmuk: A Reconstruction," *Journal of Asian History* 19, no. 1 (1985): p. 8.

archives in the Middle East through his personal friendship with the Jordanian Royal Family.[63] This lead to the publication of nearly two dozen books regarding medieval Arabian history. Foremost is *The Great Arab Conquests* which details the politics behind the Arab conquests. Yet he propagates the standard myths about Arab success, as did Charles Oman before him who attributed Arab success to "the fanatical courage of the fatalist" which enabled them to "face better armed and better disciplined troops."[64] According to Glubb, the Rashidun armies were fuelled by "the warlike spirit of the Bedouins"[65] motivated by "religion, honour and plunder."[66] The Battle of Walaja garnered a single line[67] while the Battle of Yarmouk (discussed below) was won through mostly luck and treachery instead of skill.

The Battle of Walaja in 633 could be called the finest of Khalid's career since he employed double–envelopment[68] against a numerically superior Persian force. During the course of the battle, the Arab centre seemed to weaken against the Sassanian onslaught. Sensing victory, the Persians started to concentrate their efforts in the middle. However, Khalid had prepared for this eventuality by hiding two troops of cavalry before the battle who now made their presence known by falling on the Persian flanks. Encircled by the Arabs, the Sassanians panicked and were slaughtered. Yet this episode has been a historiographical problem. The primary account of this encounter comes from Muhammad ibn Jarir al–Tabari's *History of the Prophets and Kings*. Al–Tabari (839 – 923) attributed his sources to earlier writers whose own sources have been questionable.[69] Thus while scholars such as William Muir[70] and Fred Donner[71] have accepted the version of events at Walaja, others, such as Glubb and modern day historian Hugh Kennedy, have neglected or even omitted the battle from their works.

[63] For more about Glubb's life please consult James Lunt, *Glubb Pasha* (London: Harvill, 1984).
[64] Oman, *Art of War*, p. 33.
[65] Glubb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 124.
[66] Ibid., p. 119.
[67] Ibid., p. 126.
[68] While traditionally attributed to Hannibal at Cannae in 216 BCE, the double-envelopment has also been used in the Middle East. In 1071 at Manzikert, the Turkish Sultan Alp Arslan employed a similar method to crush the Byzantines. Stephen O'Shea, *Sea of Faith* (New York: Walker, 2006), pp. 123-24.
[69] Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History of Al-Tabari*, vol. 11, *The Challenge to the Empires*, trans. Khalid Yahya Blankinship (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. xv.
[70] William Muir, *Annals of the Early Caliphate* (Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1968), p. 75.
[71] Donner, *Islamic Conquests*, pp. 181-2.

Yet Khalid's flanking tactics with horsemen at Walaja were in character for him since he employed similar methods at Uhud before and at Yarmouk after.

While the Battle of Walaja may be lost in some historiographies, the crucial encounter at Yarmouk suffers from problems of its own. According to Glubb, after a few days of skirmishing which lead to a partial encirclement by the Arabs of the Greek positions and a deterioration of morale within the Byzantine camp, a sandstorm blew up:

> On 20th August, 636, a strong hot wind was blowing from the desert. Clouds of sand and dust swept into the faces of the Byzantine soldiers. Tents . . . blown down, cooking . . . impossible . . . food and drink . . . full of grit and the blindingsand stings the face and closes the eyes. Visibility . . . reduced to a few yards . . . nothing to be done but to crouch on the ground, and wait miserably for the storm to blow itself out. . . . While even a bedouin scarcely enjoys a sandstorm, it was to them a normal experience. Moreover the direction of the gale was from them to the enemy. Their vision was hampered, but with the wind behind them, they could attack with their eyes open . . . An army accustomed to fight in ranks by word of command would, under these conditions, be almost helpless. The Arabs, however, were individualists. Full of daring, activity and initiative, every man was ready and eager to fight alone. . . . a wild horde of screaming Arabs, suddenly appearing like ghosts through the driving sand, poured across the Byzantine fortifications. . . . With the bridge in their read already seized by the Muslims, an immense slaughter resulted.[72]

Reality may have been different.

On August 15th-16th, 636, the Byzantine and Arab armies faced each other across the plain bounded by the Yarmouk River. The latter consisted of about 24,000 troops while the former had probably 40,000.[73] Amongst that number the Greeks had 10,000 of their famed *cataphracts*.[74] That figure also included Arab Ghassanid auxiliaries lead by a prince of the blood, Jabala ibn al–Ayham. His role has been a matter of controversy within the larger historiographical problem. Byzantine sources (and some modern

[72] Glubb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 178.
[73] Jandora, *Reconstruction*, p. 13.
[74] Ibid.

historians) have maintained that he was bought off by the Arabs.[75] This contention is problematic seeing how the Rashidun Caliphate could barely pay their own men let alone buy off a Ghassanid prince used to rich subsidies from the Byzantines. Furthermore, if the Byzantines had been victorious, which would have been a safe gamble seeing their martial prowess, then they would have punished al–Ayham for his treachery. Later on Al–Ayham had to submit to the Rashidun Caliphate. Yet a disagreement with the Caliph, leading to the loss of an eye, made him switch sides again and return to the Greeks.[76] It seems highly unlikely that the Byzantines would have welcomed a dangerous traitor back in their midst – one who caused them so much grief. Therefore it seems probable that at Yarmouk he ran away when faced with imminent defeat rather than being bought off.

If anything, Khalid was probably approached with a bribe which he declined.[77] Afterwards the armies settled down to business. Despite the questionable and contradictory nature of primary sources, it has been possible to reconstruct some of the events of the battle, in conjunction with the histories, through the work of an Italian orientalist Leone Caitani who visited the site before the outbreak of the First World War.[78] Utilizing his knowledge of the desert, Khalid and his commanders harassed the Byzantine army as it took up positions on the plains of the Yarmouk where the bulk of the Rashidun army was encamped. These skirmishes took place for nearly a month.[79] Khalid, meanwhile, had organized his main army into several small independently operating squadrons to establish the illusion of a larger force while providing security to neighbouring groups.[80] While the Byzantine commander was attempting to bribe Khalid, the Greek soldiers may have suffered a drop in morale because of the heat and inactivity.[81] There may have been dissension within the Greek ranks but again

[75] Ibid., p. 15.
[76] Glubb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 184.
[77] Ibid., p. 178. Kennedy, *Arab Conquests*, p. 84.
[78] Ibid., p. 84.
[79] Ibid., p. 84. Glubb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 176.
[80] Jandora, *Reconstruction*, pp. 13-14. Kennedy, *Arab Conquests*, p. 84.
[81] Glubb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 178.

historians speculate that might have been standard Byzantine propaganda explaining their defeat.[82]

The Byzantine commander then chose the 15th of August[83] to take the fight to the Arabs. The fronts stretched approximately 15 kilometres with one flank being bounded by the river. The Greek camp however, was several kilometres behind the front, accessible by only an ancient Roman bridge which crossed a ravine. Furthermore, instead of establishing two lines (one forward one rear), as outlined in the *Strategikon*, the Byzantine commander opted to establish one continuous front probably to counter the loosely spread Arab lines. That would have fatal consequences later on. On the first day, however, there was much hard fighting without any tangible gains by either side.

In the early morning on the following day, the Byzantines attacked while the Arabs were at prayer. One Arab wing thus fled to relative safety in their camp. It was then the Greek forces failed to carry out a simple manoeuvre laid out in the *Strategikon*, namely the centre being mobile enough to keep up with the cavalry on the flanks.[84] The *cataphracts*, probably flushed with impending victory, chased the Arabs into their camp. It was then that Khalid showed he was up to his old tricks in the rear. In personal command of the cavalry, he bypassed the heavier armoured horsemen to take the Byzantine line in the rear, folding it up and scattering the Ghassanid horsemen who fled in disarray.[85] However, the situation could have been salvaged if the *cataphracts* had turned after sacking the Arab camp.

Yet the Byzantine heavy cavalry had become bogged down in the Rashidun camp. The retreating Arab infantry were rallied by their women folk who joined in the fighting.[86] Furthermore, while the Rashidun cavalry used horses for battle, for transportation they used camels. These beasts were hobbled around the perimeter of the camp, blunting the Greek cavalry charge and providing defensive positions for the Arabs, according to Jandora.[87] However, one should also look into the interaction of camels and horses in the battlefield. More than a thousand years ago, the Persian

[82] O'Shea, *Sea Faith*, p. 36.
[83] Ibid., p. 37.
[84] Ibid., p. 7.
[85] O'Shea, *Sea Faith*, pp. 39-40.
[86] Glubb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 179. Jandora, *Reconstruction*, p. 16. O'Shea, *Sea Faith*, p. 39.
[87] Jandora, *Reconstruction*, p. 16.

Emperor Cyrus the Great had used camels against Greek horsemen. The horses, unused to the smell of these beasts, had balked and refused to respond to the command of their riders leaving them vulnerable to the Persians. Furthermore, when aggravated, camels can kick hard.[88] Earlier Byzantine cavalry would have had limited, if any, contact with camels in the field. Their Sassanian adversaries did not employ them and neither did the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids except as pack animals. Thus, it is entirely possible the Byzantine foray into the Arab camp may have been stalled by foul-smelling camels. Furthermore, with their charge broken, the Greeks would have been vulnerable in close quarters action, despite their armour. While the rider may have been completely armoured and the horse partially, the eyes of both man and beast and the belly of the mount would have necessarily been unarmoured.[89] Thus, in the skirmish at camp, the Arab men and women had plenty of opportunity to unhorse the Byzantine horsemen, taking them out of the equation. The Greek survivors also had to deal with Arab horsemen now at their rear.

With the Byzantines in trouble, it did not help that there may have been a sandstorm brewing.[90] Furthermore, Khalid had sent a squadron of cavalry at night to scout the Greek encampment. Seeing it virtually defenceless, they pillaged the site and seized the bridge cutting off the Byzantines from their camp. Surrounded, demoralized and tired, the Greeks were slaughtered. The Rashidun Army had comprehensively defeated a numerically, technologically and tactically superior Byzantine force. As for the Byzantine Emperor and future campaigns, Glubb puts it rather mournfully: "When the aged Heraclius heard . . . of the utter extermination of his army, he knew that the decision was irrevocable. Bidding a sad farewell to the Holy Land, which he had fought so long to win back from the Persians, only to lose it to the Arabs, he rode slowly away"[91]

Using available modern historiography, one can then piece together what might have happened at Yarmouk. That is if one were to steer clear of the biases prevalent in these histories. It is remarkable that preconceptions present in medieval sources have

[88] R. F. Glover, "Some Curiosities of Ancient Warfare," *Greece & Rome* 19, no. 55 (1950): p. 4.
[89] Ibid., p. 3.
[90] Kennedy, *Arab Conquests*, p. 85.
[91] Glubb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 179.

made their way into modern texts. Scholars in the early part of the twentieth century relied on Byzantine sources and spurned Arab ones thus propagating the idea of a weakened Greek empire conquered by treachery.[92] Later historians, such as Glubb, further propagated the idea of religious fanaticism to explain the causes of Rashidun success. Yet they echoed medieval Arab sources which attributed these victories to the Almighty and not to effective generals, especially Khalid whom Arab historians viewed as not devout enough.[93] While intrigue and religion may have played their parts in the Rashidun conquests it still does not completely explain how Arab soldiers could have stood up to the large and established combat integrated Byzantine armies – unless they had faith in their generals. Victorious commanders, such as Amr ibn al-As (conqueror of Egypt), Tariq ibn Ziyad (conqueror of Spain who gave his name to Gibraltar) and of course Khalid ibn al-Walid, established the Arab Empire. Perhaps it's time their roles became properly credited in the histories and serve as examples of how superior generalship can triumph over armies characterized by their tactical and technological superiority.

[92] Philip Mayerson, "The First Muslim Attacks on Southern Palestine (A. D. 633-634)," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 95, (1964): pp. 155-6.
[93] Nicolle, *Islamic Conquests*, p. 63. Kennedy, *Arab Conquests*, p. 76.

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