

Lesson Seven: The Islamic Maghreb and the Muslim Navy

The Islamic Maghreb

For over a century, the Umayyad Caliphate went through territorial expansion. While Syria was its main power base, with Damascus as the capital, the Umayyad Caliphate continued the Muslim conquests incorporating the Caucasus, the Maghreb, and Andalusia into the Muslim world. The arrival of Islam in the 7th century dramatically transformed the Maghreb. Arab armies spread the religion and established political control, leading to the integration of Berber tribes into the Islamic state. This period saw the rise of dynasties such as the Idrisids in

Morocco and the Aghlabids in Tunisia. It also experienced a cultural renaissance during the medieval period, with the establishment of powerful dynasties like the Almoravids and Almohads. These empires expanded their territories, promoting trade, scholarship, and architecture. Cities like Marrakech and Fez became centre of learning and culture.

The Navy during the Muslim Era

Initially hesitant towards sea power, the early Umayyad Caliphate quickly recognized its strategic importance in their ambition to supplant the Byzantine Empire. This period witnessed the construction of shipyards and the recruitment of skilled individuals, many of whom were former Byzantine subjects. The navy was particularly employed to conquer Constantinople which held immense political, cultural, and economic significance for the Arabs. Its capture was seen as the ultimate prize, symbolising the complete triumph of Islam over Christendom and legitimizing Muslim rule. There were four major expeditions against Constantinople:

- **655 AD:** Led by Busr b. Abī Artāt, this expedition resulted in a decisive Muslim victory at the Battle of Phoenix.
- **668-669 AD:** Under the command of Mu'awiya's son, Yazīd, the Muslims besieged Constantinople but were ultimately repelled.
- **674-680 AD:** This seven-year campaign involved sustained naval battles and a siege of Constantinople. The Byzantines successfully defended their capital, employing Greek

fire to devastating effect.

- **715-717 AD:** The most formidable assault, led by Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik, involved a combined land and sea siege. Despite receiving reinforcements and employing advanced siege weaponry, the Muslims were defeated due to a combination of factors, including Byzantine resilience, Bulgarian attacks, and a harsh winter.

Despite initial successes, the conquest of Constantinople proved elusive. Internal conflicts, the effective Byzantine defence tactics, and logistical challenges —particularly the lack of shipbuilding timber in the eastern Mediterranean— hampered Arab efforts. Constantinople continued to hold symbolic importance for the Muslim world, but its immediate conquest was no longer a primary objective. The focus shifted towards consolidating existing territories and engaging in other spheres of expansion and development.

Sources

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