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## **Walter E. Kaegi, Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests**

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**(review)**

Muhammed died in 632 A.D. Under his successors, Abu Bakr and Umar, the Muslim Arabs consolidated their power in the Arab homelands and within ten years had effectively de-stroyed the power of the Persian Sassanids and driven the Byzantines out of Byzantine Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt.

The speed of these developments and the rapid collapse of Byzantine and Persian imperial power in the face of the Arab onslaught present complex problems of historical analysis.

Kaegi's book is aimed at a reader with a specific interest in the military aspects of the spread of Islam, and concentrates on Byzantine failure rather than on Arab success, going on to analyse how the Byzantines developed a policy of containment.

The core of the problem of analysis is the difficulty of using and interpreting both Byzantine and Arab literary sources. Kaegi cites the narratives and sources relating to the reign of Heraclius (610-641 A.D.) They are late: those of Nicephorus and Theophanes date from the 8th and 9th centuries respectively. Further more, the problem of rhetorical artifice in literary works concerning the Emperor makes it impossible to use such material as a check against Arab sources. Strictly non-historical sources present equally difficult problems for Kaegi. He cites the range of genres and the fact that they make no effort to provide a coherent account of the Muslim campaigns as a whole.

From a detailed survey of the problems involved in dealing with the historical sources, Kaegi proceeds to set the scene for a survey of the state of the Byzantine Empire at the relevant time. He contrasts the confidence induced by eventual success in 628 over the Sassanians with persistent Christological and Ecclesiological conflict, particularly in Syria, Egypt and in Armenia, although there is no clear evidence that differences within Christianity themselves

had a de-termining influence on the effectiveness of Byzantine authority.

Kaegi points out that the temporary loss of Palestine, Syria and Egypt to the Persian in-vaders demonstrated the weakness of the Empire and its institutions, particularly the Army. Kaegi gives an account of the persistence of Late Roman practices and administrative methods. Financial considerations can be seen to be uppermost in the appointment of a treasurer instead of a soldier to command Byzantine armies in Syria and Kaegi shows that financial inefficiency mitigated against the effective recruitment of the Arab and non-Arab soldiers needed to defend the Empire. Furthermore in his detailed account of the state of the Byzantine army after victory over the Sassanians, Kaegi indicates that the quality of troops in the Empire varied a great deal and that the best troops were concentrated in and around Constantinople.

The inherent weaknesses in military organisation were compounded in the opinion of Kaegi by the repetition of errors committed when confronting the earlier threat from the Per-sians. Examples emphasised are the maintenance of the prohibition of the private ownership of weapons and the tendency of local townships to negotiate with an enemy rather than fight to the end. In addition walled towns would tend to be defended as individual entities rather than be considered as parts of a defensive line. Kaegi also points out that although precise details are dif-ficult to ascertain, the Byzantines had, by the beginning of the 630s become dependent on ar-rangements with Arabs for the defence of the peripheries of the Empire.

Before concentrating on the first Muslim incursions onto Byzantine territory, Kaegi as-sesses the reputation of Heraclius. He argues that although Heraclius was at the height of his reputation just before the Muslim invasions commenced, his military thinking would have been dominated by his experience of war with the Persians and that he would have had little knowl-edge of Arab tactics.

The core of the book is a detailed account of the campaigns fought by the Muslims and the Byzantines. A useful synopsis of engagements fought between 629 and 641 could have been

rendered even more useful by more detailed larger-scaled mapping showing possible/probable lines of advance and dates.

Kaegi argues that Heraclius' pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 630 or 631 is highly relevant to our understanding of Arab traditions concerning Heraclius' learning of imminent Arab attacks. He also emphasises that the sources indicate that Heraclius was still very much pre-occupied with theological and ecclesiological problems just at the time that the Arab threat to Syria and Palestine was about to materialise.

Before the death of Muhammed there was at least one significant but inconclusive contact between the Arabs and the Byzantines at Mu'ta in 629, which was counted as a victory for the Byzantines, but for Kaegi, the years 633-634 mark the real commencement of the military crisis for Byzantium. He returns to the sources to demonstrate the difficulty of placing many of the events in any form of geographical or chronological scheme. However, it is clear to Kaegi that the Byzantines were in the process of rebuilding their authority in the region and that the Arab invasions prevented Heraclius from carrying out this process by focusing on areas with less definite ties to the Empire.

The failure to develop a coherent response to Arab attacks in Southern Palestine led to the collapse of resistance and to relentless Arab advance. Kaegi devotes an entire chapter to the crucial battle of Jariya-Yarmuk in 636. He argues that both Arabs and Byzantines drew on the experience of the Byzantines at the battle of Adhri'at when they were fighting against the Persians. Kaegi provides a great deal of information about the Byzantine command system and describes the effectiveness of Arab tactics in bringing about the collapse and destruction of the Byzantine forces. He points out that after this battle there was no systematic policy for the defence of Syria and Palestine and that by 640, with the fall of the coastal towns of Palestine, the conquest was complete.

After surveying the circumstances of the loss of northern Syria, Byzantine Mesopotamia and Armenia, Kaegi examines some aspects of the search for scapegoats for the catastrophe. Here religious disputes are seen to be important and Kaegi also cites sources showing Muslim claims to Palestine to be based on God's promises

to Abraham. Reference is also made to the Council of Constantinople of 680 and to anti-Jewish literature. Extant sources are shown to display no evidence of any real attempt to explain military or political developments in a systematic manner. Everything appears to be dealt with in an exclusively religious context and in conformity with genres developed for the earlier conflict with the Persians.

Kaegi concludes by examining a range of factors which contributed to Byzantine failure and which enables the Empire to endure the onslaught and to lay down a basis for survival for the best part of eight hundred years. The concentration on military aspects of this period should not deter the reader with an interest in the theological and ecclesiological problems facing the Empire.

The usefulness of the book to the general reader is enhanced by generous explanatory footnotes and an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

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