

## THE FATIMID NAVY AND THE CRUSADES, 1099-1171

### I.

A host of complex developments paved the way for the ability of the European nations to establish their sea-borne empires in the Americas, Africa and South-East Asia. A technological advantage — the combination of sails and guns — was one of the crucial components behind the European success. The Muslim Middle East was one of the first regions to feel the impact of the Portuguese maritime expansion in the fifteenth century which was marked by the appearance of Portuguese fleets in East Africa and Yemen. The Mamluks, the Muslim rulers of Egypt and Syria, and later the Ottomans, responded to the Portuguese challenge by dispatching fleets to the region. During the period of the Mamluk rule (thirteen-sixteen centuries) the Muslim naval power in the Mediterranean was on the decline. The Mamluks were a cast of Turkish slave soldiers whose primary military specialization was archery. The sea was not their natural element and they showed little aptitude for adapting themselves to the need of naval warfare - dismounting. Islam, although predominantly a land power, had not always been indifferent to sea power. During the ninth century and the first half of the tenth century, for example, Muslim navies were very active in the Mediterranean and, on the whole, they were successful. The Fatimids (ruled in Tunisia 909-973, and in Egypt and Syria until 1171) from the inception of their rule had been involved in the multiple naval struggle in the Mediterranean.(1) Prior to the Portuguese naval challenge, the Crusades had posed the greatest naval threat to Islam to which the Fatimid navy failed to respond.

### II.

The main features of the Fatimid naval failure against the Crusades can be summarized as follows:

1) Between 1099-1110 the Fatimids lost most of the coastal towns of the Levant; Tyre fell in 1124 and Ascalon in 1153. The most that the Fatimid navy could achieve in those years was to slip occasionally into the coastal towns endangered by the Crusaders bringing fresh troops and provision. At crucial times, however, the Fatimid navy was always late or inactive.

2) When combined land and naval offensives were launched by the Fatimids (against Jaffa in the summer of 1102, in 1115-6 and in 1123) the navy played a minor role in these operations.

3) The Fatimid navy showed very little activity or success in raids aimed against the coast of Palestine and Syria held by the Crusaders or against Christian shipping in general.

In my view the following points must be considered as a possible explanation for the Fatimid failure:

1)The initiative was in the hands of the Crusaders who chose their targets at will. Given the naval limitations of the period (speed, range and the availability of ships) a swift naval response to attacks initiated by enemy was problematic.

2) The Fatimids faced enemies whose naval resources were larger than their own. The Fatimid fleet was a small force. In 1163, Fatimid enemies estimated the overall strength of their navy as 100 galleys (authors of the Mamluk period give lower figures; 75-80 galleys ) and 20 transport ships of various types. To these numbers, 20 ships hurling Greek fire, referred to in other sources, must be added. In comparison, the fleet that participated in siege operations against Acre in

1104 was 90 ships strong and that which operated against Tripoli in 1109 was composed of 60 ships. The fleets that fought against Tyre (November 1111-April 1112), Damietta (1169) and Alexandria (1174) included more than 200 ships.

3) John H. Pryor has shown recently that due to geographical and naval reasons the shipping lanes used by European navies on their way to Acre were practically out of range for the Fatimid navy operating from Egypt.(2)

### III

Fatimid failure must be examined in the broader context of the naval realities of twelfth century Mediterranean, especially in light of the following factors:

1) Caution was the main characteristic of naval warfare. Vassilios Christides has shown that Byzantine and Arab authors of manuals of naval warfare advocated avoiding direct confrontation with the enemy fleet. Both sides adhered to this principle even when the defence of their territories (Thessaloniki in 904, and Crete in 960-1) was at stake.(3)

2) It is important to remember the illuminating remarks of John F. Guilmartin Jr. that fleets of galleys could not achieve naval supremacy and control of the sea in the modern sense of these terms.(4)

3) The Fatimid navy was responding to threats to coastal towns. Naval power was a precondition for a successful siege against a coastal town but not a guarantee of success. The role of the navy, by its very presence at the scene, was to cut off the besieged town from its sources of supply. Siege operations were decided however by land fighting.

**Conclusions.** In light of the above discussion we can define more accurately the essence of the Fatimid naval failure. Despite the naval assistance extended to the coastal towns of the Levant their conquest by the Crusaders was not averted. Fatimid land army which failed miserably against the Crusaders on several occasions can fairly be blamed for these disasters. The limited naval resources of Egypt together with several other factors pertaining to the naval realities of the twelfth century were a contributing factor to this state of affairs.

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### NOTES

- 1) The points in this paper are elaborated, with a full documentation, in my book *State and poitns Society in Fatimid Egypt, 10th-12th Centuries*, to be published. The naval history of Islam has not been written yet. There is no study of Muslim navies comparable to H. Ahrweiler's *Byzance et la Mer*, (Paris, 1966). For the Muslim naval activity in the ninth-tenth centuries, see Y. Christides, *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs (ca. 824)*, (Athens, 1984); for the Fatimid navy, see V. Lev, in *Byzantion*, (1984), 220-52; W. Hamblin in *The American Neptun*, (1986), 77-83; for the Mamluks, see D. Ayalon's paper in his *Studies on the Mamluks of Egypt, 1250-1517*, (London, 1977).
- 2) J. H. Pryor, *Geography, Technology, and War. Studies in the Maritime History of the Mediterranean Sea, 649-1571*, (Cambridge, 1988), 80-6, 116-22.
- 3) V. Christides in *Byzantina*, (1985), 1336-7.
- 4) J. F. Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys*, (Cambridge mass., 1975), 17-9, 34-5, 131-2; Pryor, *Geography*, 106, 109; *idem* in *J. of Medieval History*, (1983), 179, 212-3.