

UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY: THE CASE OF SERCE LIMANI

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ABSTRACT

The growing achievements of underwater archaeology have added to the very limited amount of literary sources we possess. It is a new tool for studying various aspects of the development of history in medieval times.

Concerning the Arab-Byzantine relations in the Aegean Sea from the 9th – 11th centuries, the combined use of Byzantine and Arabic sources indicate that after a period of continuous sea struggles caused by the Arab conquest of Crete in ca. 824-6, which enabled the Arabs to acquire a strong naval base in the southern Aegean, a peaceful coexistence prevailed following the reconquest of Crete by the Byzantines in 961.

Ibn Hawqal, who lived in the late 10th century, complained that at his time the Byzantine ships poured into the Syrian ports. Likewise, the Persian author Nassir Khusraw, who wrote his work also at the end of the 10th century, reports that the Syrian port of Tripoli was frequented by Byzantine ships. The recently found shipwreck of Serçe Limanı firmly confirms the literary evidence which has been ignored by a number of modern scholars. It clearly shows that in this period a Byzantine ship did freely visit the Syrian ports and loaded with glass returned to Byzantium. In addition to the valuable information it offers concerning the construction of medieval merchant ships, this discovery demonstrates the great value of underwater archaeology for the study of history.

Other shipwrecks, as that of the merchant vessel at Tantura Lagoon in Israel and a number of findings in the Aegean Sea, also enhance our understanding of history in early medieval times.