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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The History of the Muslim Naval Army During the ‘Abbasid Era

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Ezad Azraai Jamsari, Abdul Qayyum Abdul Razak, Roziah Sidik, Mohamad Zulfazdlee Abul Hassan Ashari and Adibah Sulaiman: The History of the Muslim Naval Army During the ‘Abbasid Era

ABSTRACT

This article examines the history of Muslim military in the ‘Abbasid era. This study aims at revealing the achievement of the ‘Abbasid military from the 8th to 10th Century A.D. In addition, this article also identifies the establishment of military, the characteristics of its army and navy, and the types of wars and rebellions that happened at the time. This study used the method of qualitative study which consists of historical study and content analysis to identify and analyze both primary and secondary sources that are deemed relevant to the ‘Abbasid history and civilization. This research found that the ‘Abbasid military became a great naval power which frightened the Byzantine Empire because the former is comparable to that of the Byzantium (Eastern Roman) in terms of their military recruitment, payroll, structure and organization, weapon technology and tactics of attack.

Key words: Military history, Muslim naval army, ‘Abbasid era, 8th-10th Century A.D.

Introduction

The Arabian Peninsula is surrounded by three seas, the Persian Gulf in the east, the Indian Ocean and Red Sea in the south. The fertile and pastured territory in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, Hadramaut, Oman and Bahrain along the coast, usually became important as a centre of exchange. Most of the Arab inhabitants of this territory were interested to live as travellers and wished to become traders as well as great seafarers. Thus, the inhabitants of Saba (Sabaeans) of Yemen enjoyed valuable fertile coastal land which was developed by trading activities with India (Fahmy, A.M., 1966). After the revolt crisis against the Umayyad Empire, the centre of government shifted from Sham to Iraq. Thus, a naval expedition from Sham and Iraq against Constantinople was halted and the capital city was spared of the threat from the eastern Mediterranean. The ‘Abbasid Kingdom was a superpower at odds with Byzantine, and frequent wars were waged between them annually (border wars).

The ‘Abbasid sovereignty operated their naval force from Taurus whereas the Byzantines were based in the port of Cibyrrhaeot and Samian (Fahmy, A.M., 1966). In the first year of Caliph al-Mu‘tasim’s reign, there were several battles with the Byzantines, which ended in Byzantine’s heavy defeat in the year 223 A.H./838 A.D. in Amorium. In addition, the conquest of Sicily and Crete by the Muslim navy occurred in the west in the same year. The Emperor Theophilus had to request for reinforcement from other powers, that is, from Louis the Pious, who had sent his navy to attack Sham and Egypt. In the year, 839 A.D., Emperor Theophilus obtained the reinforcement but did not make any gains (Fahmy, A.M., 1966). In Islamic history, sovereignty and political stability of a kingdom is closely associated with its competent military and good governance. This is clearly evident from the successful achievement of the Nasrid Kingdom in Granada (Jamsari, E.A., 2011) and the Marinid Kingdon in Fas (Jamsari, E.A., 2012) in the 13th to 15th Century A.D.

This article aims at revealing the achievement of the ‘Abbasid military from the 8th to 10th Century A.D. In addition, this article also identifies the establishment of military, the characteristics of its army and navy, and the types of wars and rebellions that happened at the time.

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The First Naval Expedition:

In the year 226 A.H./841 A.D., a peace agreement was ratified by Emperor Theophilus and Caliph al-Mu‘tasim which lasted until the Caliph ordered a naval expedition to attack Constantinople. In the year 227 A.H./842 A.D., Commander Abu Dinar had led a navy of 400 men to sail from the port of Sham. The Caliph then died in the same year as Theophilus and did not live to witness the destruction of his navy. It was almost entirely destroyed by a seastorm at Chelidonian along the coast of Lycian. Seven of the ‘Abbasid battleships later made a decision to return to Sham. Thus, Constantinople was spared of the attack (Fahmy, A.M., 1966).

The Second Naval Expedition:

At the end of the 3rd Century of Hijrah or early 10th Century A.D., the ‘Abbasid naval force was a formidable power in the Aegean Sea. At this time, there was a plot to oppose Emperor Leo VI by Andronicus, supported by his son Constantine and an aristocrat Eustace. This combination of three prominent revolutionaries had a combined strength from the aspect of feudal land and naval commander descent. Eustace was the chief admiral for the Emperor since the year 894 A.D. He was also the division observing colonel and the most influential soldier in the Byzantine empire then (Fahmy, A.M., 1966). In the year 289 A.H./August 902 A.D., Eustace had acted in wars with the Muslim army and in winter had met up with Nicholas Mysticus (who was recently appointed as head of the family in Constantinople) to come to an understanding for the common interest of all and the church. Samonas, an Arabic eunuch, had entered into the Emperor’s service and helped Emperor Leo VI to abort a plan by the relatives of Augusta Zoe who wished to overthrow the Emperor. Finally, Samonas was placed in the personal service of the Emperor, relating to secret police work. However, he tried to flee to Sham in March 904 A.D. after betraying the Emperor, but was caught and brought back to the city. On Leo VI’s order, Samonas was executed (Fahmy, A.M., 1966). In the middle of Sha‘ban 291 A.H./early July 904 A.D., the ‘Abbasid naval army had 54 galleys each carrying about 200 fighters as well as officers and was led by the bravest and most skillful Muslim admiral, Rashid al-Wardani or Ghulam Zurafa.

Confronting The Byzantine Naval Force:

Conquest of Sicily:

After the Muslim conquest of Africa, attention was focused on the island of Sicily. The expedition to conquer this island began during the time of Mu‘awiyah who governed Sham then. The attack on Qawsara (Cossyra) by the Muslim navy under the governor Mu‘awiyah ibn Hudayj during the rule of Caliph Mu‘awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan. Qawsara, a small island at the foot of a volcano in the Mediterranean island between Sicily and Tunisia, became an important place in the conquest of Sicily. In the year 102 A.H./720 A.D., during the reign of Caliph Yazid ibn ‘Abd al-Malik, Muhammad ibn Aws al-Ansari had attacked Sicily and returned with captives and spoils of war. During the rule of Caliph Hisham ibn ‘Abd al-Malik in the year 109H/727 A.D., his governor in Africa, Bishr ibn Safwan had returned with many captives. On the demise of Bishr, his follower ‘Ubaydah ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman conducted several series of attacks on this island (Fahmy, A.M., 1966). When ‘Ubayd Allah was appointed governor of Africa in the year 116 A.H./734-735 A.D., he had ordered an army to conquer it. In this battle, Byzantine was defeated, but had nevertheless, taken several Muslim prisoners including ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Ziyad who was held prisoner until 121 A.H./738-739 A.D.. The conquest lasted until ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib became governor of Africa. In the year 135 A.H./752-3 A.D., he made good preparations to reconquer Sicily (Fahmy, A.M., 1966).

Attack on the Island of Sardinia:

The expedition to conquer and ultimately conquest of Sardinia began in 89 A.H./707-708 A.D. led by ‘Ata’ ibn Rafi’. It was next led by ‘Abd Allah ibn Murra who directed Musa ibn Nusayr. The latter brought back as many as 3,000 prisoners and considerable spoils of war including gold and silver. In the year 93 A.H./710 A.D., Musa recaptured Sardinia although his fleet was destroyed on the way back. In the year 135 A.H./752-753 A.D., the governor of Africa, ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Habib had prepared as best as possible to conquer both Sicily and Sardinia. The attacks on these two islands had caused Emperor Constantin V to take precautionary measures to strengthen defence and a fleet of ships were directed to safeguard the islands. Due to this step by the Emperor together with the internal problems of the Caliphate system as well as the turmoil in the province of Africa, the two islands finally were able to enjoy peace lasting for half a century (Fahmy, A.M., 1966).

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Conquest of Cyprus Island:

According to al-Baladhuri, the first naval expedition to Cyprus was led by Mu‘awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan (al-Baladhuri, Ahmad ibn Yahya, 1983). He had previously requested permission from Caliphs ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab and ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan but was denied. In the year 28 A.H., he succeeded in landing on Cyprus Island and made an agreement with the inhabitants after defeating them. Cyprus was one of the islands in the Mediterranean archipelago, targeted by the Muslim army in its series for expansion of control. In the year 69 A.H./688 A.D. or 70 A.H./ 689 A.D., Cyprus was included in an agreement between the Caliph and Justinian II. ‘Abd al-Malik faced internal problems because it was discovered that he had paid for the peace agreement. ‘Abd al-Malik was also paying an annual gift in cash as well as a slave and a horse per day. In addition, the revenue from Cyprus was equally shared between the two powers. However this did not last long. Emperor Justinian had begun to breach the agreement by moving a big proportion of the population to Hellespont and refusing to accept the cash gift in the form of coins with Qur’anic verse imprint (Forand, P.G., 1962; Fahmy, A.M., 1966).

In the year 79 A.H./698 A.D., Emperor Tiberius III (Apsimares), had given special attention to defence of his empire by attacking the Muslim army from the sea. His idea was to reinstall defence of Cyprus Island against attacks by Muslim ships. He then sent three Cypriot aristocrats to the Caliph together with a royal officer to request the release of Cypriots from Sham. The Caliph granted their request and Cyprus was finally able to be redeveloped (Fahmy, A.M., 1966).

Attacks on Cyprus were continued during the ‘Abbasid rule. In the year 157 A.H./773 A.D., a naval army was sent by Caliph al-Mansur to conquer Cyprus and arrest its governor. However, Caliph Abu Ja‘far al-Mansur did not at this time impose on the Cypriots (*Qubrus*) as he had revoked the tax increase on them as had been done by Caliph Mu‘awiyah (al-Baladhuri, Ahmad ibn Yahya, 1983; al-Baladhuri, Ahmad ibn Yahya, 1968).

In the year 174 A.H./790 A.D., several of the Muslim army who were transferred from Egypt to Sham were captured by the Byzantine army. At the same time, the Muslim navy was docking in Cyprus and then positioned itself in Asia Minor. Empress Irene had sent her royal battleship to confront the Muslim navy in the Gulf of Atalia. The Byzantines were defeated and their commander, Theophilus was captured and brought to the Caliph. Cyprus was attacked again in the year 190 A.H./809 A.D. during the tenure of Humayd ibn Ma’yuf al-Hamdani, governor of coastal Syria due to a revolt by the Cypriots (al-Baladhuri, Ahmad ibn Yahya, 1983; al-Baladhuri, Ahmad ibn Yahya, 1968; Hitti, P.K., 1958). The Muslim attack was very successful, and had released about 16,000 prisoners including a minister (Fahmy, A.M., 1966). Himerius had later provoked to take revenge on Damyana in the year 297 A.H./909-910 A.D. The expedition was recorded by al-Mas‘udi who stated: “due to Cypriot’s breach of the agreement which had been made since long ago, during that time (of making the agreement), they would live in peace and were to pay half of the gifts to Byzantine and the other half to the Muslim party, Damyana, the commander ruling the Mediterranean territory (Byzantium), had conquered the island and besieged it for four months, burnt, seized and released prisoners and controlled places where he fortified”.

This proved that Cyprus was no longer under Muslim rule during Damyana’s time (al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1964; al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1985; al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1985; al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1992). The conclusion from this series of conquests is that Cyprus from 1 A.H./7 A.D. to 4 A.H./10 A.D., had been under the ‘Abbasid military control for a long period of time and certainly not under Byzantine rule as such.

Conquest of Crete:

The Muslim army had attacked the island of Crete since 1 A.H./7 A.D. The island had been attacked before by the ‘Abbasid navy during the rule of Caliph Harun al-Rashid. He had sent Humayd ibn Ma’yuf al-Hamdani for this purpose. During the reign of Caliph al-Ma’mun, he had sent Abu Hafs ‘Umar ibn ‘Isa al-Andalusi who was better known as al-Ikritish (al-Baladhuri, Ahmad ibn Yahya, 1968; al-Baladhuri, Ahmad ibn Yahya, 1983). Later, Crete was attacked once again by the Muslim immigrants from Spain during the time of Caliph Ma’mun. There was a revolt of about a quarter of the Cordovans against Amir al-Hakam (180-206 A.H./796-822 A.D.) in al-Andalus. A number of these travellers from al-Andalus who were accompanied by their children and wives had sailed off leaving their homes behind. They came to Alexandria in 199 A.H./814-815 A.D. Later, they were able to defend themselves from any enemy threat. They had elected Abu Hafs as their leader and had captured Alexandria city in the month of Dhu’l-Hijjah 200 A.H./July 816 A.D. maintaining control there until the rule of Caliph al-Ma’mun who then sent his general, ‘Abd Allah ibn Tahir in 210 A.H./24 April 825 A.D. untill 13 April 826 A.D. to resolve problems in Egypt (Fahmy, A.M., 1966; Yucesoy, H., 2002).

Expedition to Marmara Sea:

The war campaigns in the years 781-782 A.D. were directly between the ‘Abbasids and the Byzantine Empire. Harun, as representative of the ‘Abbasid army, was sent by his father, Caliph al-Mahdi, to lead a big expedition to Marmara Sea. This expedition was almost ended due to a big catastrophe which befell them. However, Harun was able to make an agreement with Irene whereby Byzantine promised to pay a tribute symbolic of respect to the ‘Abbasid Kingdom, and a ceasefire of three years’ duration , as well as the setting up of bazaars for Muslims to buy food during this time (al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1964; al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1985; al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1985; al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1992). Byzantine later continued peace efforts with Caliph Harun al-Rashid. In the year 798 A.D., Irene had sent Euthymius, minister of Sardis, as emissary with a gift to avoid attacks against Byzantine. In the year 803 A.D., Nicephorus I had sent a message to Harun to revoke the previous agreement with Irene. Harun had responded harshly and attacked as Nicephorus I had not only refused to offer a gift, he had also refused to pay taxes (al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1964; Kennedy, H., 1992).

Prisoner Exchange:

In the 9th Century A.D., relations between Byzantine and ‘Abbassids were more of diplomatic activity. Discussions and agreements between the parties were related to the issues of war and peace. It was at this time that they both achieved a balance in terms of military strength and both sides kept numerous prisoners of war. Thus, this factor had led them to engage in exchange and ransom of war prisoners as the main focus of their diplomatic relationship (Kennedy, H., 1992). There were 12 meetings between the two parties between 805 A.D. and 946 A.D.

The number of military ransomed was between 2,000 and 6,000 men with each meeting. Al-Mas‘udi stated in Kennedy (1992) that each meeting lasted between seven and ten days but that the first meeting in the year 805 A.D., had lasted for 40 days. The venue of the meeting was the same, the flat field of the river Lamis which flowed into the Mediterranean Sea; the Muslims on the eastern bank and the Byzantines on the western bank (Kennedy, H., 1992; Fahmy, A.M., 1966). And at the first meeting, Byzantine ships had arrived loaded with Muslim prisoners.

In the year 845 A.D., Muslim ibn Abi Muslim al-Jurami from Zibatra was released. He was skilled in the affairs of the empire borders and knowledgeable about Romans. He had also written down much about the Byzantine Empire, the layers of its society, its cities and its streets. Besides that, he had also explained on the best time to attack Byzantine and a little about the states surrounding Byzantine such as Burjan, Avar, Bulgar, Slav, Khazar and others (Kennedy, H., 1992; Kennedy, H., 2001). During this century, there were a great number of prisoner exchanges. Theophilus had written to Caliph al-Ma’mun in the year 831 A.D. to request the release of as many as 7,000 prisoners of war for ransom money of 100,000 *dinar*.

And in the year 832 A.D., Theophilus worked to persuade Caliph al-Ma’mun from attacking his empire. For this purpose, Theophilus sent an emissary, John (the Grammarian) to the Caliph. In a letter brought by John, Theophilus expressed his wish for peace between the two parties together with an increase in commercial activities and release of prisoners (al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1964; Yucesoy, H., 2002).

In the year 861 A.D., during the period of Caliph al-Mutawakkil, this relationship was still continuing. In fact, al-Mutawakkil had sent his emissary, Nasr ibn al-Azhar to Constantinople to deal with prisoner exchange. The effect of this was the release of 2,000 prisoners by Constantinople while ‘Abbasid released 1,000 prisoners. This exchange was accompanied by gifts of musk, silk, saffron without any ransom money. In the year 903 A.D., two Byzantine emissaries appeared before Caliph al-Muktafi in Baghdad regarding the release of Muslim prisoners. Finally, the two parties agreed. In the year 907 A.D., two emissaries were sent by Leo VI. One of them was Basil (the eunuch). Caliph al-Muktafi sent his emissary to gather all Muslim prisoners in the hands of Byzantine and Basil in turn gathered all Byzantine prisoners with the Muslims (al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, 1964; Kennedy, H., 1992).

Conclusion:

Attacks and conquests in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea and the Marmara Sea showed that the ‘Abbasid navy was a major power of that time. It had sophisticated weapon and equipment and massive crew. This had enabled the ‘Abbasid caliphs to launch attacks on the islands in the territorial waters of Byzantine. The aim of these attacks was to consolidate the dominion of the ‘Abbasid sovereignty and to make Byzantine realize the real capability of its naval force. Thus, after the victories gained, Byzantine ultimately realized and recognized the ‘Abbasid sovereignty. This can be seen during the rule of Caliph al-Mahdi who sent his son Harun al-Rashid to Marmara Sea, which finally in an agreement with Irene, Byzantine agreed to pay a gift or tribute to the Caliph.

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