

A TURNING POINT IN THE ISLAMIC-BYZANTINE STRUGGLE: THE BATTLE OF YARMŪK (15/636)

İSLÂM-BİZANS MŪCADELESİNDE BİR DÖNŪM NOKTASI: YERMŪK SAVAŞI (15/636)

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Abstract

From the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), multifaceted relations took place between the Muslim Arabs and the Christian Byzantines. Byzantine Empire was one of the two superpowers of the period along with the Sāsānian Empire. Military struggles have an important place in the relations between Muslims and Byzantium. Among these, the Battle of Yarmūk, which took place in 15/636 during the reign of Caliph ‘Umar, is a turning point for both Islamic and Byzantine history.

In the Byzantine-Sāsānian struggle that continued during the birth years of Islam, Muslims were in favor of the Byzantines, the People of the Book, against the Zoroastrian Sāsānids. The envoy sent by the Prophet to Heraclius during the Medīna period was well received by the emperor. However, after a while, the Prophet’s envoy to the governor of Busrā was killed by the Christian Ghassānid emīr. When Byzantium supported the Ghassānians in the Battle of Mu’ta, the armies of Islam and Byzantium faced each other for the first time. This was followed by the Prophet’s expedition to Tabūk against Byzantium with an army of 30,000 men. During the reign of Caliph Abū Bakr, the Islamic armies fought against the Sāsānids on the Iraqī front and the Byzantine armies in Syria. With their victory at the Battle of Ajnādeyn that took place in this period, the gates of Syria were opened to the Muslims.

During the reign of Caliph ‘Umar, the struggle continued on both fronts. After the victories of Fihl and Marj al-Şuffar against Byzantium, the Islamic armies captured the center of Syria, Damascus. Then the cities of Ba‘labak, Hama and Homs (Hims) were conquered. Finally, the Battle of Yarmūk, fought between the Islamic and Byzantine armies in 15/636 decided the fate of the region and Syria fell to the Muslims. Emperor Heraclius, who had hoped that he could take back the lands the Muslims had conquered in the region, gave up hope and left the region, returning first to Antioch and then to his capital Constantinople (İstanbul).

The Muslim victory over Byzantium at Yarmūk was a turning point in Islamic history. After this victory, the Islamic armies conquered al-Quds (Jerusalem), the religious center of the Christians, and other cities in the Palestinian region. This was followed by the conquest of al-Jazīra and Egypt. With the first naval battle of the Islamic navy against the Byzantine navy during the reign of Caliph Uthmān, the Muslims started to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords: Islam, Muslims, Byzantium, Byzantine Empire, Caliph ‘Umar, Heraclius, Battle of Yarmūk, Syria

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Öz

Hız. Peygamber (s.a.v.) döneminden itibaren Müslüman Araplar ile Hıristiyan Bizanslılar arasında çok yönlü ilişkiler gerçekleşmiştir. Bizans İmparatorluğu o sırada Sâsânî İmparatorluğu ile birlikte dönemin iki süper gücünden biriydi. Müslümanlarla Bizans arasındaki ilişkilerde askeri mücadeleler önemli bir yer tutmaktadır. Bunlardan Hız. Ömer döneminde 15/636 yılında meydana gelen Yermük Savaşı hem İslâm hem de Bizans tarihi için bir dönüm noktası niteliği taşımaktadır.

İslâm'ın doğuş yıllarında devam eden Bizans-Sâsânî mücadelesinde Müslümanlar ateşperest Sâsânîler'e karşı ehl-i kitap olan Bizans'tan yana bir tavır içerisinde idiler. Medine döneminde Hız. Peygamber'in Herakleios'a gönderdiği elçi imparator tarafından iyi karşılandı. Ancak bir süre sonra Hız. Peygamber'in Busra valisine gönderdiği elçi Hıristiyan Gassânî emiri tarafından öldürüldü. Bunun üzerine meydana gelen Mûte Savaşı'nda Bizans Gassânîler'e destek verince İslâm ve Bizans orduları ilk defa karşı karşıya geldi. Bunu Hız. Peygamber'in 30.000 kişilik ordusuyla Bizans'a karşı düzenlediği Tebük Seferi takip etti. Hız. Ebû Bekir döneminde İslâm orduları bir taraftan Irak cephesinde Sâsânîlerle mücadele ederken diğer taraftan Suriye bölgesinde Bizans ordularıyla karşılaştılar. Bu dönemde meydana gelen Ecnâdeyn Savaşı ile Suriye kapıları Müslümanlara açılmış oldu.

Hız. Ömer döneminde de her iki cephede mücadele devam etti. İslâm orduları Bizans'a karşı kazandıkları Fihl ve Mercüssuffer zaferlerinden sonra Suriye bölgesinin merkezi Dimaşk'ı ele geçirdiler. Ardından Ba'lebek, Hama ve Humus şehirleri fethedildi. Nihayet İslâm ve Bizans orduları arasında 15/636 yılında meydana gelen Yermük Savaşı bölgenin kaderini belirledi ve Suriye Müslümanların eline geçti. O güne kadar Müslümanların bölgede fethettikleri toprakları geri alabileceğini düşünen İmparator Herakleios bundan ümidini kesti ve bölgeden ayrılarak önce Antakya'ya, ardından da başkent İstanbul'a döndü.

Müslümanların Bizans karşısında elde ettiği Yermük zaferi İslâm tarihinde bir dönüm noktası oldu. Bu zaferin ardından İslâm orduları Hıristiyanlar'ın dinî merkezi olan Kudüs'ü ve Filistin bölgesinin diğer şehirlerini fethettiler. Bunu el-Cezîre ve Mısır bölgelerinin fethi izledi. Hız. Osman döneminde İslâm donanmasının Bizans donanması ile yaptığı ilk deniz savaşı olan Zâtüssavârî zaferi ile de Müslümanlar Doğu Akdeniz'e hâkim oldular.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslâm, Müslümanlar, Bizans, Bizans İmparatorluğu, Hız. Ömer, Herakleios, Yermük Savaşı, Suriye

Introduction

From the birth of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the early 7th century until the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453 and the fall of the Byzantine Empire, Muslims and Byzantines had multifaceted relations, including political, religious, economic, socio-cultural, etc., intertwined with war and peace. A significant part of these relations between the Islamic and Byzantine societies, which had different religious, ethnic and socio-cultural structures and were also "neighbours", consisted of military struggles. The Battle of Yarmük, which we analyse here, represents one of the most important turning points for both sides in terms of its results in the context of the Islamic-Byzantine struggle.

Since the subject of the article is the Battle of Yarmük, which was a turning point in the Muslims' struggle against Byzantium, the main sources of both Islamic and Byzantine history and research works on the subject are consulted. Islamic and Byzantine sources are used as a basis and the narratives in these sources are analysed according to scientific methods. In addition, books and articles written by experts in the field are evaluated and the results obtained are presented.

Developments before the Battle of Yarmūk

In order to better understand the Battle of Yarmūk and its significance, it would be useful to outline the course of relations between the Muslims and Byzantium before the battle. The history of relations between Muslims and Byzantium can be traced back to the early years of Islam. At that time, the Byzantine-Sāsānian wars were followed by the Muslims with keen interest, who were in a very weak position against the polytheists in Mecca. In this process, the Muslims sided with the Byzantines, who were *Ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book), and the polytheists sided with the Zoroastrian Iranians. The successive defeats of the Byzantines by the Sāsānian armies delighted the polytheists and saddened the Muslims. For the polytheists used to say:

If Allah were the sole victor, as you say, and if He helped those who believed in Him, He would have helped the Byzantines, the People of the Book, and would not have defeated them against the Sāsānids. Just as the Zoroastrians defeated the People of the Book, we will overcome you and destroy you.¹

The Sūrah al-Rūm was revealed announcing that the defeated Byzantines would be victorious in three to nine years and that the Muslims would rejoice at this result². Indeed, after a while, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641) inflicted a heavy defeat on the Sāsānid armies in Nineveh in 627, the Byzantine-Sāsānian struggle that had lasted for centuries, ended with the decisive victory of Byzantium, and the news of this victory delighted the Muslims, who by that time had migrated from Mecca to Medīna and found a safe place.³

It is known that after the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyya, which was signed by with the Meccan polytheists and envisaged a ten-year peace between the parties, the Prophet (pbuh) sent letters to prominent rulers of the time in order to invite them to Islam. One of these letters was sent to Emperor Heraclius through Dihya b. Khalīfā al-Kalbī (d. 50/670 [?]), who knew the Syrian region well due to his commercial connections (Muharram 7 / May 628). By that time emperor Heraclius, who had gained the upper hand over the Sāsānian ruler Khusraw II after years of warfare, was in al-Quds (Jerusalem) to restore the Holy Cross, which had previously fallen into the hands of the Sāsānids, and to make a religious visit as an expression of gratitude to God.⁴ The Emperor Heraclius received Dihya b. Khalīfā al-Kalbī, who came to him through the intercession of the governor of Busrā, and also met with Abū Sufyān and his companions that included Meccans who had traveled to Syria for trade, and received information about the Prophet. Heraclius is reported

1 al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān*, Egypt: al-Matba'at al-Maymaniyyah, I-XXX, 1321 A. H., XXI,15; Casim Avcı, *İslām-Bizans İlişkileri (610-847)*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara 2020, p. 99.

2 Sūrah al-Rūm 30/1-5.

3 al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, XXI, pp. 15-21; Avcı, *İslām-Bizans İlişkileri*, pp. 99-100.

4 The date of Heraclius' visit to Jerusalem is disputed, and the years 628-631 are given for it. See Nikephoros, *Short History*, ed. and trans. By Cyril Mango, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington 1990, p. 185, translator's note].

to have remarked that the information given was in accordance with the prophetic qualifications mentioned in the Bible. He treated Dihya well and sent him off with gifts.⁵

In the 8th year of the Hijrah (A.D. 629), a new era in Islamic-Byzantine relations began and the Islamic army confronted the Byzantine soldiers for the first time at Mu'ta.⁶ Although there are different opinions, the main cause of the battle was the killing of the Prophet's envoy al-Hāris b. Umayr al-Azdī by the Ghassānid emir Shurahbīl b. 'Amr, while passing through the territory of the Christian and Byzantine's ally Ghassānids, on his way to deliver the Prophet's message of invitation to Islam to the unnamed governor of Busrā.⁷ In response to this flagrant violation of international code of conduct, which stipulated the inviolability of ambassadors, the Prophet prepared an army of 3,000 men and sent them to Byzantine territory under the command of Zayd b. Hāritha. In the meantime, he ordered that if Zayd was martyred, Ja'far b. Abū Tālib should be the commander; if Ja'far was martyred, Abdullah b. Ravāha should be the commander; and if he was martyred, the soldiers should choose a commander for themselves. Shurahbīl b. 'Amr, who was aware of the preparations of the Muslims, asked for help from Byzantium. Upon this, Emperor Heraclius supported the Ghassānids with a large army under the command of Theodoros (Vikarios). The Christian Arab tribes in the region also joined the Byzantine army under the command of Shurahbīl b. 'Amr. The Islamic army reached Mu'ta, where it encountered the Byzantine army, which is rumored to have numbered 30,000 or more men. Shortly after the start of the battle, the commanders of the Islamic army, Zayd b. Hāritha, Ja'far b. Abū Tālib and Abdullah b. Ravāha were martyred one after another. The soldiers then appointed Khālid b. al-Walīd, who had recently converted to Islam, as commander. Taking into account the superiority of the Byzantine army in numbers, Khālid b. al-Walīd decided to retreat and with the successful tactics, he managed to retreat without much casualties (Jumādā I 8 / September 629).⁸

In the 9th year of the Hijrah (A.D. 630), upon the news that Emperor Heraclius was preparing a large army against the Muslims, the Prophet prepared an army of 30,000 men despite the drought and famine and made it clear that the Byzantine army was the target. It is understood from the news about the preparations for war in the Islamic society in the Qur'an⁹ and Islamic historical sources that Byzantium, which had achieved a decisive superiority over the Sāsānids,

5 al-Bukhārī, *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, I-VIII, Çağrı Yayınları, İstanbul 1981, "Bed'u'l-wahy", s. 6; Muslim, *Sahīh Muslim*, I-V, Çağrı Yayınları, İstanbul 1981, "Jihād", s. 74; al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh al-Umam wa'l-Mulūk*, ed. Abu'l-Fazl Ibrahim, I-XI, Dāru Suwaydān, Beirut 1967, II, p. 649; Muhammad Hamidullah, *Islām Peygamberi*, trans. Salih Tuğ, I-II, İrfan Yayınevi, İstanbul 1990, I, p. 343-350; Avcı, *Islām-Bizans İlişkileri*, p. 44.

6 Mu'ta is a place with large agricultural lands south of Lake Lot, 11 km. from Qarak and 50 km. from Jerusalem. See Hüseyin Algül, "Mûte Savaşı", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslām Ansiklopedisi (DİA)*, XXXI, s. 385.

7 For different opinions, see Mustafa Fayda, *Allah'ın Kılıcı Halid Bin Velid*, Çağ Yayınları, İstanbul 1990, pp.143-148.

8 Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes A.D. 602-813*, trans. Harry Turtledove, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 1982, p. 36; Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Meghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones, I-III, Alam al-Kutub, Beirut 1404/1984, II, pp. 755-769; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*, ed. Muhammad as-Saqqā, I-IV, Mustafa al-Bābī al-Halabī, Cairo 1955, II, pp. 373-389.

9 Sūrah al-Tawbah, 9/38-106.

was seen as a serious power by the Muslims. The Islamic army, commanded by the Prophet himself, stopped at Tabūk, 700 kilometers north of Medīna on the Syrian road. After staying there for two or three weeks, they returned without coming across the Byzantine army, so; in the meantime, some troops were sent off to invite the surrounding tribes to Islam. Settlements in the region such as Aqaba, Adhruh, Jarbā, Maqnā, Maʿān and Dūmat al-Jandal came under Islamic rule with jizya treaties.¹⁰

After the death of the Prophet, the first caliph Abū Bakr (632-634) suppressed the apostasy movements (*riddah wars*) that posed a great danger to the nascent Islamic state and started conquest activities on two fronts, on the edges of the Arabian peninsula. He sent al-Muthannā b. Hāritha and Khālīd b. al-Walīd to the Sāsānian-controlled region of Iraq, while Yazīd b. Abū Sufyān, Shurahbīl b. Ḥasana and ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ led three separate military units to conquer Byzantine-controlled Syria and Palestine. These three armies, each consisting of 3,000 men at the beginning, reached a military strength of 7,500 men each with the reinforcements sent later. Thus, the conquest operations started on two main fronts (12/634).¹¹

The army under the command of ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ succeeded against the Byzantine forces in Wādīlarebe in southern Palestine and then defeated the famous Byzantine commander Sergios in Dāsīn (Gaza). Sergios was killed in this battle. Emperor Heraclius, who was informed of these developments when he arrived in Homs, sent an army of 80,000 men under the command of his brother Theodoros to Palestine in order to stop the Muslim advance. Meanwhile, ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ, who was besieging the city of Qaisāriyah, realized that he could not resist the approaching Byzantine army, so he lifted the siege and asked for help from Abū Bakr. The Caliph sent a message to Khālīd b. al-Walīd, who was on the Iraqī front, and ordered him to go to the Syrian front with a cavalry unit of 500-800 men under his command. After a long and tiring desert journey, Khālīd b. al-Walīd attacked Marjirāhit, the headquarters of the Christian Ghassānids near Damascus, and defeated the Byzantine forces. Then he headed south and met Shurahbīl b. Hasana and Yazīd b. Abū Sufyān in Busrā. Busrā was captured peacefully after a short siege. Advancing northward and uniting with the soldiers of ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ, the Islamic army, under the command of Khālīd b. al-Walīd, confronted the Byzantine army under the command of Theodoros in the area of Ajnādeyn between Remle and Bayt Jibrīn, west of al-Quds (Jerusalem). The Muslims, whose morale had recently been boosted by their victories against the Sāsānids, won a great victory in their battle with the Byzantine forces, the most powerful army of the period, superior to them in terms of both numbers and equipment (28 Jumādā I 13/30 July 634).

10 Wāqīdī, *al-Maghāzī*, III, s. 989-1025; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah an-Nabawīyah*, II, 515-529; al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, 100-111; Fayda, *Allah'ın Kılıcı Halid b. Velid*, pp. 214-216; Işın Demirkent, "Herakleios", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)*, XVII, s. 213; İsmail Yiğit, "Tebük Gazvesi", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)*, XL, s. 228-230.

11 A. N. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century 602-641*, trans. M. O. Grant – H. T. Hionides, I-II, Adolf M. Hakkert, Amsterdam 1968-1972, II, s. 47-48; Hakkı Dursun Yıldız, "Ecnādeyn Savaşı", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)*, X, s. 385.

With the victory of Ajnādeyn, the gates of Syria and Palestine were opened to the Muslims. Caliph Abū Bakr died shortly after the news of this victory.¹²

During the reign of Caliph ‘Umar (634-644), who became the caliph after Abu Bakr, the Islamic armies fought against the Sāsānid armies on the east, and continued to fight against Byzantium on the Syrian front. At the end of the 13th year of the Hijrah (early 635 A.D.), the Islamic armies inflicted heavy losses on the Byzantine forces in the successive battles of Fihl and Marj al-Şuffar. After these defeats, the Muslims pursued the Byzantine soldiers who took refuge in Damascus and besieged and conquered the city in Rajab 14 / September 635. In the same year, they also won the Battle of Marj al-Rūm. Meanwhile, the cities of Ba‘labak, Homs and Hama were also conquered by the Muslims.¹³ As a result of all these developments that we have outlined so far, the two armies came face to face at Yarmūk.

The Battle of Yarmūk

Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, seeing that his troops in the Syrian region were being defeated one after another by the Islamic armies and that important cities in the region were being lost one by one, prepared a large army with a last hope to stop the Muslim advance and take back the places they had captured. The Emperor appointed Theodoros Trithurios (Sakellarios) as the commander-in-chief of the army that he assembled by gathering troops from Antioch, Qinnasrīn, Aleppo, al-Jazīra, Homs, etc., and appointed Wāhan (Bahan) of Armenian origin as the deputy commander-in-chief; he himself preferred to stay in Antioch. In addition to the Ghassānids, the Byzantine army also included soldiers from the branches of the Qudāa tribe such as Lahm, Juzām, Āmila, and some other Syrian Christian Arabs and Armenians.

The Muslims, who were aware of Byzantium’s preparations, began to make the necessary preparations. Abū Ubaydah b. Jarrāh, the commander-in-chief of the Syrian armies, ordered the Islamic troops in Damascus and Homs to withdraw from these cities and march to the front. al-Balāzurī mentions an exemplary behavior of the Muslims during the withdrawal; the Muslims returned the *jizya* tax they had collected from the people of Homs on the grounds that they could not provide the safety and security they had promised in return for the *jizya*. The Christians and Jews living in the city were impressed by this behavior of the Muslims and expressed their satisfaction with the Muslim rule, saying, “Your rule and justice is better for us than the oppression and tyranny we were under before.”¹⁴ This narration not only reflects the basic spirit and purpose of the Islamic conquests, but also gives an idea of the reasons behind the rapidity of the conquests.

12 al-Balāzurī, *Futūhu’l Buldān: Ülkelerin Fetihleri*, trans. Mustafa Fayda, Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, Ankara 1987, pp. 156-165; Mustafa Fayda, *Allah’ın Kılıcı Halid Bin Velid*, Çağ Yayınları, İstanbul 1990, p. 349; Yıldız, “Ecnādeyn Savaşı”, *DİA*, X, s. 385.

13 Demirkent, “Herakleios”, *DİA*, XVII, s. 213.

14 al-Balādhurī, *Futūhu’l Buldān*, pp. 195-196.

As mentioned above, the commander-in-chief of the armies on the Syrian front was Abū Ubayda b. Jarrāh. Because, Caliph Umar had dismissed Khālīd b. al-Walīd from the position of commander-in-chief a while after he became the caliph and appointed Abū Ubaydah b. Jarrāh in his place. However, Khālīd b. al-Walīd proved his military acumen, experience and genius as one of the commanders of the Islamic army in the Battle of Yarmūk and played an important role in the victory of the Muslims. After consulting with the commander-in-chief Abū Ubaydah b. Jarrāh, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, Yazīd b. Abū Sufyān and other commanders, he introduced for the first time a new order of battle, the battalion and company system, which the Muslim Arabs did not have known before. Seeing that the Byzantine army was divided into small units, he divided the Islamic army into 36-40 units and appointed a commander for each of them. Thus, he prevented the dangers that might arise from the army holding together all the time. The commander-in-chief, Abū Ubaydah b. Jarrāh was positioned in the center of the army, while ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ was in command of the right wing troops and Yazīd b. Abū Sufyān was in command of the left wing troops. Commanders such as Shurahbīl b. Hasana, Iyāz b. Ganm, Ikrimah b. Abū Jahl and Habīb b. Maslama were in charge of various units. Khālīd b. al-Walīd had placed a unit under Saīd b. Zayd at the rear of the army for support and security, and divided the cavalry unit under his command into two parts, one led by him and the other by Qays b. Hubayrah. He placed one of the troops on the right side and the other on the left side behind the army and put them in battle formation; he took measures to ensure the mobilization of these troops according to the course of the battle. Then he encouraged the soldiers with his speeches and made them spiritually as well as materially ready for war.¹⁵

In the heat of the summer of the Hijri year 15 (636), the armies of Islam and Byzantium met in the valley of Yarmūk, which opens to the east of the Jordan. Although there were some skirmishes in between, in general, the past three months were mostly eventless and the final preparations were completed. The battle of Yarmūk began with a fierce Byzantine attack. So much so that Byzantine troops managed to advance up to the Islamic camp. Some of the soldiers of the Lahm and Juzām tribes, who had joined the Islamic army during the preparations for the battle began to flee at the height of the battle and took refuge in nearby villages. In the face of this difficult situation of the Islamic army, Khālīd b. al-Walīd immediately took new measures. On the one hand, he ordered the warrior women in the rear of the Islamic army to prevent the deserter and kill them if necessary, and on the other hand he was looking for the right time for the cavalry to attack, which would change the fate of the war. After repelling the first attacks of the Byzantine soldiers, Khālīd b. al-Walīd ordered an attack on the gap between the Byzantine cavalry and the infantry, in order to cut the connection between the two units. In the meantime, serious conflicts and dissolutions occurred in the Byzantine army; many soldiers fled the battlefield. Theophanes even records that the soldiers revolted and proclaimed Wāhan as emperor instead of Heraclius. The sandstorm that broke out during the battle also caused difficulties for the Byzantine army.¹⁶

15 al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, s. 396-397; Fayda, *Allah'in Kılıcı Halid b. Velid*, pp. 418-419.

16 Theophanes, *The Chronicle*, p. 38.

In the end, after a fierce battle, the Muslims were able to defeat the Byzantine army, which was superior to them in numbers and military equipment (12 Rajab 15/20 August 636).¹⁷ Khālīd b. al-Walīd, who revealed his military genius with the tactics and strategy he applied during the war, won the title of “Fātih al-Shām” (Coquerer of Syria) in addition to the title of “Sayfullah” (Sword of Allah) given to him by the Prophet for his success in the Battle of Mu’ta.¹⁸

The Byzantine army suffered a heavy defeat at the Battle of Yarmūk and suffered many casualties. Among those killed was the commander-in-chief Theodoros. While the Byzantine army suffered tens of thousands of casualties, the Muslims are reported to have lost 3,000 martyrs.¹⁹ The Byzantine soldiers who survived the battle fled to Palestine, Antioch, al-Jazira and Armenia. Iyāz b. Gann, who was assigned the task of chasing some of them, advanced as far as Melitene (Malatya) and made a treaty with the inhabitants of the city on condition that they pay the jizya. Heraclius, who was aware of this, sent troops to burn the city. Heraclius, who had personally commanded his armies in his wars against the Sāsānids, led the fight against the Islamic armies from behind the front lines, first from Homs and then from Antioch. After the Battle of Yarmūk, he traveled from Antioch to Edessa (Urfā) and Samosata (Samsat) trying to rally his dispersed army, but he failed and had to return to Constantinople (İstanbul) in despair (September 636).²⁰ As Heraclius was leaving the region, he said, “O Syria! Peace be upon you. What a beautiful country this is for the enemy!” and lamented the capture of the region by the Muslims.²¹

As mentioned above, the Battle of Yarmūk took place on 12 Rajab 15 (August 20, 636). However, in the sources there is a dispute about the exact date of this battle. The main reason for this is that Sayf b. ‘Umar, one of al-Tabarī’s sources, confused the Battle of Ajnādeyn, which took place in 13 (634) during the reign of Abū Bakr, with the Battle of Yarmūk, which took place in 15 (636) during the reign of ‘Umar. In fact, this confusion originating from the account of al-Tabarī is reflected in some research works and the Battle of Yarmūk is dated before the Battle of Ajnādeyn. However, many other sources other than al-Tabarī record that the Battle of Yarmūk took place in the 15th year of the Hijrah (A.D. 636) after the Battle of Ajnādeyn. In fact, Khalīfah b. Hayyāt and al-Balādhurī give this date.²² Ibn Asākir, citing many sources, states that

17 Theophanes, *The Chronicle*, p. 38; al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, p. 570-572; Ibn A’sam al-Kūfī, *el-Futūh: Fetihler*, trans. Mehmet Cevher Caduk, Ankara Okulu Yayınları, Ankara 2020, pp. 187-229; Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, II, 63-74; W. E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and The Early Islamic Conquests*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 112-122; Georg Ostrogorsky, *Bizans Devleti Tarihi*, trans. Fikret Işıltan, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara 1991, pp. 102-103; Fayda, *Allah’ın Kılıcı Halid b. Velid*, pp. 419-420; David Nicolle, *Yarmuk AD 636: The Muslim Conquest of Syria*, Oxford 2006, p. 1 ff.; Mahmut Kelpetin, *Hulefâ-yi Râşidîn Dönemi Tarihi, Seyf b. Ömer ve Tarihçiliği*, Siyer Yayınları, İstanbul 2012, pp. 177-184; Mustafa Fayda, “Yermük Savaşı”, *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)*, XLIII, s. 485-486.

18 Fayda, *Allah’ın Kılıcı Halid b. Velid*, pp. 418-419; Fayda, “Yermük Savaşı”, *DİA*, XLIII, s. 485.

19 al-Balādhurī, *Futūhu’l Buldân*, p. 192; al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, p. 572; Kelpetin, *Hulefâ-yi Râşidîn Dönemi Tarihi*, p. 181.

20 Demirkent, “Herakleios”, *DİA*, XVII, s. 213-214; Fayda, “Yermük Savaşı”, *DİA*, XLIII, s. 485.

21 al-Balādhurī, *Futūhu’l Buldân*, p. 195.

22 Khalīfah b. Khayyāt, *Tārīkh*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār, Dār al-Fikr, Beirut 1414/1993, pp. 88-89; al-Balādhurī, *Futūhu’l Buldân*, p. 195.

the Battle of Yarmūk took place in the year 15 (636) and then adds that the year 13 (634) given by Sayf b. ‘Umar is not accepted as correct.²³ However, it should be noted that al-Tabarī, who dated Yarmūk to 13 (634) and Ajnādeyn to 15 (636), narrated the Battle of Yarmūk based on an account by Ibn Ishāq when he described the events of the 14th year of Hijra (635 A.H.) and added that the two armies met at Yarmūk on Rajab 15, which is concurring with the information in other sources.²⁴ In addition to this, a Syriac chronicle, which has survived to the present day with some parts erased and is believed to be from the year 637, gives the date of the Battle of Yarmūk as August 20, 947 according to the Seleucid calendar. This corresponds to the date of 12 Rajab 15 AH, (August 20, 636 A.D.).²⁵

Both classical sources and modern researchers give different figures about the number of soldiers of the Byzantine and Islamic armies at the Battle of Yarmūk. The Byzantine historian Theophanes records that there were 40,000 soldiers in the Byzantine army under the command of Theodoros and Wāhan²⁶, while the Islamic sources Khalīfah b. Hayyāt and al-Tabarī, quoting Ibn Ishāq, give the number as 100,000.²⁷ al-Tabarī records that this number included 12,000 Christian Arabs under Jabalah b. Ayham and 12,000 Armenian soldiers under Jarege (George).²⁸ Some Islamic sources also give figures such as 120,000, 200,000, even 400,000 and 800,000 for the total number of Byzantine troops, which are clearly exaggerated.²⁹ De Goeje estimates the number as 80,000³⁰, Donner as 20,000-40,000 and Stratos as 30,000, while Kaegi estimates around 15,000-20,000.³¹

Accounts of the number of soldiers in the Islamic army also differ. Theophanes says “a very numerous Arab army”³² while al-Balādhurī, al-Tabarī and Ibn Asāqir give the number of 24,000.³³ There are also accounts that put the number of Muslims at 25,000, 36,000, 41,000 or

23 Ibn Asāqir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Umar b. Gharāma al-Amrī, I-LXXX, Dār al-Fikr, Beirut 1415/1995, II, p. 141-142.

24 al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, p. 570-571.

25 Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West Syrian Chronicles*, Liverpool 1993, p. 1; Abdurrahman Acar “Müslümanlarla Bizans Arasındaki Yermük Savaşı’nı Anlatan Süryanice En Eski Metin”, trans. Abdurrahman Acar, *Dicle Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, V/2, (2003), p. 71-75; Fayda, “Yermük Savaşı”, *DİA*, XLIII, s. 486.

26 Theophanes, *The Chronicle*, p. 38.

27 Khalīfah b. Khayyāt. *Tārīkh*, p. 89 (The same source also gives the figure of 300,000 quoting Ibn al-Kalbī); al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, p. 570.

28 al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, p. 570. Ibn Asāqir also gives the same account, see *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, II, p. 144.

29 al-Wāqidī (Attributed to him), *Futūh al-Shām* (Conquest of Syria), Dār al-Jīl, Beirut [no date], p. 162-163; al-Balādhurī, *Futūhu’l Buldān*, p. 192; al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, p. 400, 402 (narrated by Sayf b. ‘Umar); Ibn Asāqir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, II, p. 143, 145; Boaz Soshan, *The Arabic Historical Tradition and the Early Islamic Conquests*, London 2015, p. 84; Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, II, p. 65; Fayda, “Yermük Savaşı”, *DİA*, XLIII, s. 485.

30 For this information, see Fayda, “Yermük Savaşı”, *DİA*, XLIII, s. 485.

31 Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, II, p. 65; Kaegi, *Byzantium and The Early Islamic Conquests*, p. 131; F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton 1981, p. 221.

32 Theophanes, *The Chronicle*, p. 38.

33 al-Balādhurī, *Futūhu’l Buldān*, p. 192; al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, p. 571; Ibn Asāqir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, II, p. 143.

46,000.³⁴ Based on these accounts and estimates about the number of soldiers in both armies, it seems possible to say that the number of soldiers in the Byzantine army was 50,000-100,000 and the number of soldiers in the Islamic army was around 25,000.

It is also recorded that there were around 1,000 Companions in the Islamic army, 100 of whom were veterans of Badr. Among them were women Companions who participated in the war with their husbands and children, including Asma, the daughter of Caliph Abū Bakr, Umm Habība bint al-‘Āṣ, Havla bint Sa‘laba al-Ansāriyya, and Hind bint Utba, the wife of Abū Sufyān, etc. The women, who were stationed on a hill behind the army, encouraged the soldiers to fight by reciting poems, as well as participating in the battle by using swords themselves, fighting the Byzantine soldiers who advanced at the beginning of the battle, in a way almost competing with the men. In particular, Hind bint Utbah, who participated in the battle with her husband Abū Sufyān, encouraged the Muslims to fight with her stirring speeches, and when the Muslims showed signs of weakness, she and other women helped them to rally back.³⁵

After Yarmūk

After the Muslim victory at Yarmūk, Syria was slipped out of the hands of Byzantium. Islamic soldiers, who had left Damascus and Homs before the battle, recaptured these cities. The local non-Muslim inhabitants of these cities welcomed the Muslims with demonstrations of gladness and accepted Islamic rule again in exchange for the jizya tax.³⁶ In 16 (637), Shayzer, Qinnasrīn, Aleppo, followed by Antioch, Edessa (Urfa), Raqqa and Nisibis (Nusaybin) surrendered to the Muslims with short intervals. After the conquest of Syria and al-Jazīra, the borders of the Islamic state reached the Taurus Mountains. The Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, in order to protect the people living in the border regions from the threats and attacks of the Muslims, withdrew them to the interior and left back a large, empty area. On the other hand, the conquest of Palestine continued and the Christian holy center of al-Quds (Jerusalem) was besieged. The people of al-Quds (Jerusalem) begged for mercy from Abū Ubaydah b. Jarrāh, the commander-in-chief of the Islamic armies, and offered to make a treaty similar to the treaties made by the Muslims with the Syrian cities, and declared that they wanted to surrender the city to the caliph personally. Caliph ‘Umar, who was informed of the situation, came to al-Quds (Jerusalem) and took over the city from Patriarch Sophronios and signed the treaty (17/638). In 640, other cities of Palestine were conquered, including the important city of Qaisāriyah. In the same year, the Islamic forces also conquered Mesopotamia and advanced northward from there, entering Irmīniya (Armenia). In

34 For an example of the conflicting reports on the number of soldiers in both armies, see Soshan, *The Arabic Historical Tradition and the Early Islamic Conquests*, p. 84.

35 al-Balādhurī, *Futūhu’l Buldān*, p. 193; al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, p. 397, 401, 571; Ibn Asāqir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, II, p. 143, 145, 150, 152, 154, 156; Fayda, *Allah’ın Kılıcı Halid b. Velid*, p. 419.

36 al-Balādhurī, *Futūhu’l Buldān*, p. 196.

October 640, the castle of Dvin was captured. At the same time in the south, the conquest of Egypt had also begun and a significant part of it had fallen into the hands of the Muslims.³⁷

Heraclius died in Istanbul on February 11, 641, after succumbing in despair from witnessing how Byzantium lost power day by day in the face of the successes of the Islamic army. One year after his death, the Islamic armies under the command of ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ conquered Alexandria and the Egypt was lost to Byzantium entirely. During the reign of Uthmān (644-656), who succeeded ‘Umar as the third caliph, while the conquests in North Africa continued, the newly established Islamic navy confronted the powerful Byzantine navy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The first major naval battle between the two navies took place off the coast of Finike on the Anatolian coast and went down in history under the name Dhāt al-Sāwārī, referring to the large number of masts, hence ships that participated. In this battle the Muslims inflicted a heavy defeat on the Byzantine navy (31/652 or 34/655). Thus, the Byzantine dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean came to an end as well. As can be seen, the Muslims, who forced Byzantium to withdraw from Syria with the victory of Yarmūk, conquered Palestine, al-Jazīra, Egypt and North Africa after this victory, and the Islamic navy established in this process put an end to Byzantium’s dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, the Battle of Yarmūk has gone down in history as an important turning point in the Islamic-Byzantine struggle.

Conclusion

The Battle of Yarmūk, which took place between the Islamic and Byzantine armies in 15/636 is important as it was the result of a decade long power struggle between the two sides in the Syrian region. Byzantine Emperor Heraclius had succeeded in concluding the centuries-long Byzantine-Sāsānian struggle with Byzantium’s decisive superiority in Nineveh over Emperor Khusraw II in 627, but this time he came face to face with the Islamic armies that emerged as a new power. After the Prophet’s death, the Muslims won one victory after another against Byzantium during the campaigns launched by the first caliph Abū Bakr in the Syrian region, and these victories were crowned with the Yarmūk victory during the reign of Caliph ‘Umar. The victory of Yarmūk put an end to the Byzantine domination in Syria and ensured the Muslim domination of the region. After the victory of Yarmūk, the Muslims expelled the Byzantines from Syria and conquered the lands of Palestine, Al-Jazīra, Egypt and North Africa, and defeated the Byzantine navy, effectively putting an end to Byzantium’s dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean.

37 Demirkent, “Herakleios”, *DĪA*, XVII, p. 210-215.

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