

SI SHEPPARD, *Constantinople AD 717–18: The Crucible of History*. Illustrated by GRAHAM TURNER. Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd 2020. 96 pp. – ISBN: 978-1-4728-3692-2 (paperback: £15.99).

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A new and detailed study of the massive Umayyad campaign against Constantinople in 717–18 has long been desired. The earlier Umayyad sieges have received some scholarly attention recently,<sup>1</sup> but 717–18 has remained largely untouched. The 717 siege does not have the sort of source problems in the Greek texts that the 654 or 669 sieges do, but it has the added complication of difficult Syriac, Arabic, and Armenian sources that need to be taken into consideration. This volume was produced by Osprey, a UK-based publisher of short and attractive military history books for a popular audience. Hence the intention of this book was never to provide a new and detailed study of the events, but rather to assemble an introductory but fairly comprehensive narrative of events. While the author is not particularly well-served by current academic literature on the subject, the book possesses a range of other flaws and unfortunately its readership is poorly served.

The last serious attempt to write a history of this siege was more than half a century ago.<sup>2</sup> RODOLPHE GUILLAND made a valiant effort and his narrative remains the most convincing and comprehensive, but he based his article largely upon a few Greek sources. In the time since he wrote that study, our understanding of Byzantium, early Islam, and methods of reading the texts produced by both societies has advanced tremendously. SHEPPARD is aware of the limitations of Guillard and attempts to integrate a wider range of source material. Unfortunately, more does not mean better.

1. MAREK JANKOWIAK, *The First Arab Siege of Constantinople*. *Travaux et Mémoires* 17 (2013) pp. 237–320. SHAUN O’SULLIVAN, *Sebeos’ Account of an Arab Attack on Constantinople in 654*. *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 28.1 (2004) pp. 67–88.

2. RODOLPHE GUILLAND, *L’Expedition de Maslama contre Constantinople (717–718)*. *Al-Machriq* 49 (1955) pp. 89–112; re-published in IDEM, *Études Byzantines*. Paris, 1959, pp. 109–33. Tsangadas’ narrative largely follows GUILLAND: BYRON C. P. TSANGADAS, *The Fortifications and Defense of Constantinople*. Boulder 1980, pp. 134–52; much of the discussion is to be found in the notes on pp. 279–98.

The approach to sources is one of this book's major flaws. To be fair, there are virtually no language- and tradition-specific studies of the siege narratives which SHEPPARD could have drawn upon, but some basic awareness of how to use Near Eastern sources from the time of the early Islamic period would have benefitted this book immensely.<sup>3</sup> SHEPPARD's approach can perhaps best be summarized as scattershot: if a text has something interesting to say about the siege, he'll use it, regardless of how many centuries later it was written. Texts which are available in English translation receive priority. For example, SHEPPARD makes frequently use of the Kitāb al-'Uyun, even making extensive quotations from ERNEST W. BROOKS' partial translation, but never cites BROOKS nor does his article appear in the general bibliography.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that later sources are necessarily worse; rather, they need to be approached on their own terms in what they are trying to say to their contemporary audiences and the traditions upon which the texts rest. Hence some attention needed to be given to how Greek sources treat the event in light of Leo III's iconoclasm, and how Arabic sources do it in relation to the general denigration of the Umayyads after the middle of the eighth century. SHEPPARD would have benefitted from reading at least the recent works of JAMES HOWARD-JOHNSTON and CHASE F. ROBINSON.<sup>5</sup>

Various Arabic sources are not introduced at all, nor are they listed in the bibliography. Knowing more about where SHEPPARD found them, when they date from, and authorial intention would be invaluable. Similar problems exist for Syriac – Michael the Syrian and the Chronicle of 1234 are key sources, but there is no discussion of the tradition or how intertwined the Syriac material is.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Chronicle of Zuqnin is referred to as an "Arab" text (p. 29) but is written in Syriac. On this note, SHEP-

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3. Perhaps it appeared too late for inclusion, but Dragoljub Marjanović has profitably examined how Nikephoros interpreted the siege in his *Short History: DRAGOLJUB MARJANOVIĆ, Creating Memories in Late 8th-century Byzantium: The Short History of Nikephoros of Constantinople*. Amsterdam 2018, pp. 170–77.

4. ERNEST W. BROOKS, *The Campaign of 716–718, from Arabic Sources*. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 19 (1899) pp. 19–31, cf., especially, p. 22 with SHEPPARD's block quote on 56.

5. JAMES HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century*. Oxford 2010; CHASE F. ROBINSON, *Islamic Historiography*. Cambridge 2003.

6. SHEPPARD would have found much of value in MURIEL DEBIÉ, *L'écriture de l'histoire en syriaque : transmissions interculturelles et constructions identitaires entre hellénisme et islam*. Leuven 2015.

PARD several times uses “Arab” to refer to the language (pp. 29, 30) rather than as an ethnonym. In other cases, we get questionable stories like Theophanes’ treatment of Justinian II or (p. 24) a verbatim citation of a hostile account about the caliph Yazid (p. 16) without any consideration of why the texts might be saying such things (for a similar case, see p. 49 for invective against Sulaymān from much later).

In matters of interpretation, the general narrative presents some problems. Occasionally the book presents outdated or unsupported ideas as pure fact. For example, Constans II is alleged to have abandoned Constantinople for the west because the population was hostile to him (p. 14), yet scholars such as SALVATORE COSENTINO, CONSTANTIN ZUCKERMAN, and WALTER KAEGI have plausibly viewed the move as a strategic decision to shore up Roman control of the central Mediterranean prior. Theophanes’ hostile account of Justinian II is taken up (p. 24) with no consideration of how writers under the Isaurians and later treated the Herakleians. SHEPPARD accepts the dates of August 15, 717 and August 15, 718 for the beginning and end of the siege. That this happens to be the feast of the Koimesis of the Theotokos, the protectress of Constantinople, certainly raises questions, as does the fact that one of the Syriac accounts mentions the arrival of Arab forces in late spring. Leo III is always portrayed as a trickster intending to deceive Maslama right from the beginning. However, he was not the first strategos of the Anatolikon who seems to have considered throwing his lot in with the Umayyads and we find him commanding Arab cavalry on the march to Constantinople. SHEPPARD is rightly incredulous about Maslama’s decision to believe that Leo was ready to hand over the city, and his solution is that Leo was just really tricky (pp. 70–1) even though Maslama was a veteran commander. More likely, however is that the story of Leo tricking the great Umayyad general is grossly embellished as it has been taken up in the Arabic tradition.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, SHEPPARD’s discussion of Byzantine military organization is deeply problematic and conflates three centuries of an evolving system into something that was in place by the early eighth century (pp. 44–7). His talk of defence-in-depth would have benefitted from the context of Umayyad campaigns in Asia Minor as studied by RALPH-JOHANNES LILIE.<sup>8</sup> SHEPPARD places *akritai* peasant-

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7. ANTOINE BORRUT, *Entre memoire et pouvoir : l’espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbassides* (v. 72–193/692–809). Leiden 2011, pp. 229–82.

8. RALPH-JOHANNES LILIE, *Die byzantinische Reaktion auf die Ausbreitung der Araber. Studien zur Strukturwandlung des byzantinischen Staates im 7. und 8. Jahrhundert*. Munich 1976.

soldiers on the borders of the empire in this period and notes how they struggled against powerful landholders. However, the struggle between small-holding soldiers and large landowners is a tenth-century matter, and the *akritai* are a twelfth-century novelistic fantasy about an imaginary ninth- and early-tenth century border zone.

The book is sloppy throughout. SHEPPARD is inconsistent in his presentation of Greek names, sometimes Latinizing them and sometimes not, and this applies as well to the maps. He refers to Byzantine coinage as “bezants” (p. 22) but this is a medieval Latin term. Blacharnae (p. 26) is a typo. Constantinople is apparently guarded by, amongst other, mercenaries (*foederati*, p. 48); *phoideratoi* in the east were regular army units by the early sixth century and at no point in Roman history is the *foedus* straightforward enough to call those under it mercenaries. The Anatolikon thema is referred to through as Anatolikan. Despite the caption, the Golden Gate is not depicted on p. 57. Melitene is once referred to as Malatya (p. 86). The twelfth-century Syrian scholar Ibn ‘Asakir is said to have personally participated in the siege (p. 64). SHEPPARD makes the claim that Umayyad vessels did not approach the Golden Horn when the chain across the inlet was lowered out of fear of fire from the Galata Tower (p. 68), yet Galata Tower is a fourteenth-century Genoese structure. The Byzantine fortifications there were probably limited to the shore whereas the Genoese tower is half a kilometre from the present waterline and at an elevation of some fifty metres. SHEPPARD’s discussion of the Umayyad siege lines is unclear (p. 62); does this include Galata, and did the Umayyads extend their works around the Horn? SHEPPARD seems to imply that both spring relief fleets in 718 (from Alexandria and Carthage, respectively) were crewed by Copts; how did the Copts get from Egypt to Carthage, or the fleet without a crew from Carthage to Egypt? That Leo III issued laws in Greek is apparently “in recognition of the empire’s shifting identity,” (p. 29) but Justinian pre-empted him by two centuries and identity is more complex than language. SHEPPARD also repeats the story about the Ottoman Turks building the Eyep Camii after finding the grave of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari near Constantinople, but this is almost certainly a pious fiction intended to link the Ottoman capture of Constantinople to the sieges of the early Islamic world.

Despite these criticisms, not all is bad. The book is lavishly illustrated and the maps and plans follow what can be known from the sources. SHEPPARD uses many of his own excellent photos and the book benefits from

this. GRAHAM TURNER's illustrations are lovely and one wishes that there were more than three. The post-siege discussion (pp. 81–86) is quite good and offers a valuable new interpretation of the importance of the siege: maybe it was not the watershed event that it has been assumed to be in the academic literature at least since Blankinship<sup>9</sup> and that the Abbasid revolution is truly the defining point of change in the Roman Empire's relation to its Islamic neighbours.

Unfortunately, SHEPPARD then takes these interesting points and completely throws them out the window to place the siege into some Huntingtonian clash of civilizations narrative. There is more than a hint of American culture wars here, as we read that to the left "Muslims can only be victims" (p. 36). He cites only Karen Armstrong as a proponent of this view, ignoring a vast body of work that greatly complicates the simple picture of competing religions and civilizations that SHEPPARD seeks to paint. He tries to set the siege in an ongoing attack of Islam on the west in an effort to vindicate the view that western civilization would not exist had Constantinople fallen. This is a dubious claim which gives no attention whatsoever to the long-term dynamics of the Mediterranean basin. In SHEPPARD's world, jihad eventually inspired crusade and religious fanaticism is the driving force of history. Yet he makes no allowance for cultural similarities between Byzantium and the Umayyad state; he leaves open no possibility for a Yuan dynasty model of elite assimilation had the Umayyads re-united the Near East by taking Constantinople in 717. Islam was still very much an elite phenomenon in the process of forming itself in the early eighth century and the boundaries were nowhere as clear between Graeco-Roman antiquity and the new rulers from Arabia.<sup>10</sup> Within this clash of civilizations framework we get some strange statements like how the Mardaites were the "final manifestation" of Graeco-Roman culture (p. 21), an utterly bizarre and baseless idea. Europe is also invoked rather frequently, conflated with "the West" (whatever that is, SHEPPARD never defines it). It is said to be under siege by Islam, but SHEPPARD fails to note the range of Islamic polities participating for most of this, and they spend as much time fighting each other as they do "Europe". The book ends with the spirit of jihad being passed to the Turks (again, with no dis-

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9. KHALID BLANKINSHIP, *The End of the Jihād State: The Reign of Hishām Ibn ‘Abd Al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads*. New York 1994.

10. JACK TANNOUS, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers*. Princeton 2018. GARTH FOWDEN, *Qusayr ‘Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria*. Los Angeles 2003.

inction made of the many Turkic groups involved with the Islamic world) whose victory in 1071 at Manzikert finally led to the First Crusade. Europe was able to develop sufficiently under the shield of Byzantium until it was called to strike back at Islam in response to centuries of aggression, or so SHEPPARD claims. This Manichaean wish-fulfillment has no basis in history.<sup>11</sup> The world was never so simple, and like crusading, jihad was an idea much more complicated in practice than it was in the minds of theologians, or that of contemporary pundits. Once again we have the two great cultures of the early medieval Near East relegated to the sidelines of a narrative about Europe.

**Keywords**

Arab-Byzantine relations; Constantinople; military history; siege of Constantinople  
717–718

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11. For the Turks attacking Byzantium and the origins of the First Crusade, SHEPPARD would have benefited from reading ALEXANDER BEIHAMMER, *Byzantium and the Emergence of Muslim-Turkish Anatolia, ca. 1040–1130*. Abingdon 2017.