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MILITARY INTELLIGENCE IN ARABO-BYZANTINE NAVAL WARFARE*

During the long Arab-Byzantine struggle for supremacy in the Mediterranean Sea from the seventh to the fourteenth century an unexplored factor, of paramount importance, was their military naval intelligence. An attempt will be made in the present paper to present some facets of this complex topic about which little has been written[1].

Ports

Naval intelligence starts from the ports. Arabic and Byzantine sources scrupulously describe how the defense of the ports must be organized in order to prevent infiltration by foreign ships and agents, while historical sources reveal that in spite of all precautions intelligence gathering continued to thrive. The play of cat and mouse never ended.

The best instructions for protection against spying in general and naval intelligence in particular are to be found in a short manual on naval warfare inserted in the major work of Qudāma bn. Ja'far, known as *Kitāb al-Kharāj*[2].

In Ibn Qudāma' s manual the Emir instructs the authorities to be vigilant with foreigners entering the Dār al-Islām. He advises thorough checking to ensure that they do not return to their countries with weapons or any war supplies[3]. Likewise, the legislator Abū Yūsuf in his book *Kitāb al-Kharāj* states that foreign merchants

1. The topic of military intelligence during the Arabo-Byzantine struggle in general is of great interest and importance. My former students Dr. N. Koutrakou and Dr. G. Taher have undertaken the task to accomplish this work.
2. For this short manual see V. Christides, «Two Parallel Naval Guides of the Tenth Century: Qudāma's Document and Leo VI's Naumachica: A Study on Byzantine and Moslem Naval Preparedness», *Graeco-Arabica* 1 (1982). p. 54. The short manual is found in the edition of *Kitāb al-Kharāj* by H. Khadivajum, Teheran 1870, pp. 22-26.
3. *Ibid.*

in the land of Islam should be investigated and any weapons they possess confiscated; not even horses should be permitted to leave with them[4].

Moreover, according to Abū Yūsuf, the Emir warns that the merchants' papers must be examined and if they contain any important secret information regarding the land of Islam, they should immediately be arrested; it will be left to the Imam to determine their punishment[5].

Punishment of spies was cruel. Non-Muslims could be condemned to death, often by crucifixion, to serve as an example. Muslim spies could be also condemned to death but not crucified[6].

Ibn Qudāma's most specific instructions on naval intelligence focus on port safety[7].

Wa amarahu an yaḍumma al- marākiba fī'l mawāniy allatī tarsā fīhā.

«He [the Emir] orders him [the commander] to place the ships together in the ports, in the place where they anchor».

Ḥatta lā yakhrudja minhā markabun illā bi'ilmihi wa lā yadkhulu fīhā ghayruhā.

«[The port commander should be constantly on the alert] so that no ship leaves port without his knowledge and that no ship enters without his permission».

Every ship entering an Arab port had to have special permission from the Arab authorities. Every merchant entering a port also needed the proper papers. Details of such papers appear in the recently published Geniza documents of G. Khan. They were in the form of 'iqrarāt and «such 'iqrarāt were drafted by notaries and witnessed by professional witnesses of certified honesty ('udūl). The documents were validated by a judge and registered in the archives»[8].

In Qudāma's manual the Emir mentions explicitly the existence of foreign spies ready to penetrate Arab ports:

Wa amarahu bishiddati al hadhari min djawāsīsi al-ʿaduwi.

«He [the Emir] ordered him [the commander] to pay utmost attention to the spies of the enemy».

It is noteworthy that the Arabs respected any foreign ship sailing into their ports if it carried the proper documents. Even when a foreign ship was suspected of entering an Arab port illegally and its crew pretended to be merchants, they could not be immediately arrested. Abū Yūsuf says that if a crew posing as merchants carrying goods to the Muslims were proved to be liars, then the ship would be

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4. Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-Kharāj*, ed. Cairo, Cairo 1983, p. 189; French trans. by E. Fagnan, *Le livre de l'impot foncier*, Paris 1921, p. 293.

5. Abū Yūsuf, Arabic text p. 190, French trans. p. 294.

6. *Ibid.*

7. See Qudāma, ed. H. Khadivajum, p. 25.

8. G. Khan, *Arabic Legal and Administration Documents in the Cambridge Geniza Collections*, Cambridge 1993, p. 29.

confiscated and the men sent to be judged by the Imam. He adds that if a foreign ship is forced by the weather to seek refuge in a Muslim port and the crew declares falsely that they carry a letter to the Imam, their ships will be confiscated and the Imam will decide their fate[9].

It was understood that trade and intelligence went (and still go) hand in hand. Travelling merchants could double easily as intelligence agents and the tenth century writer, Ibn Ḥawqal, complains of the ease with which the Byzantine cargo ships frequenting the Syrian ports gathered crucial information[10].

In order to defend the coastal towns against Byzantine raids in times of war, the Arabs constructed a series of defense towers from the Pharos of Alexandria to the Atlantic Ocean. They were called *ribāṭ* and dedicated soldiers, the *murābiṭūn*, a class of ascetic warriors, undertook the task of watching out for any appoaching ships. Some of their constructions were developed from earlier Byzantine towers[11] (Fig. 1A, 1B). In addition to the *ribāṭ*, the Arabs, like the Byzantines, used chains to protect their ports. Such chains were drawn across the entrance to the port of Tunis.

In spite of all these measures, enemies found various ways of infiltrating. One of the most intensive uses of espionage against the Arabs of Alexandria occurred during the period when Byzantine Cyprus was in the hands of the Franks, the house of Lusignan, who became master of this island in 1192. Alexandria at that time was a prosperous port with lucrative trade, importing timber and iron from Venice and silk and other products from the East[12].

The French rulers of Cyprus flooded Egypt with spies and a number of their spies reached as far inland as Cairo disguised as women; they were arrested and punished accordingly. One of their spies, disguised as *faqīr* (wondering holy man), managed to reach the area of Aboukir (the sensitive Egyptian port where Nelson burned Napoleon's ships in 1798). The *faqīr* had friendly relations with the local fishermen who readily filled his request for fish for his entourage, whereupon he lit a bonfire supposedly to cook the fish but in reality to signal his compatriots, waiting offshore in their ships. Once within Aboukir they raised havoc. The pseudo-faqīr spy was able to disappear without a trace[13].

9. Qudāma, p. 26.

10. Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ*, ed. Cairo, n.d., p. 180. French trans. by J. H. Kramers and G. Wiet, *Configuration de la terre*, Beirut and Paris 1964, p. 193.

11. See M. Marin, «El Ribat en al Andalus y en el Norte de Africa», R. Azuar (ed.), *La Rabita Califal de las dunas de Guardamar*, Alicante 1989, pp. 121-130; J. Chabbi, «Ribāṭ», *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* 2 VIII (1994), pp. 493-506; a thorough discussion of the *Ribāṭ* and the *murabitun* is to be found in the unpublished dissertation of S. Martinez Lillo, *El Ribat en el Mediterràneo Occidental: Ifriqiyah y al Andalus*, Madrid 1994.

12. Anwar ʿAbd al-ʿAlim, *Al-Milāḥa wa ʿUlūm al-Biḥār ʿainda al-ʿArab*, Kuwait 1979, p. 117.

13. *Ibid.*

Turning our attention to the Byzantines, we notice that their naval manuals are more succinct and any information is presented discreetly because of the fear that it could be used by enemies. Two passages, one found in Leo VI's *Naumachica* and the second in Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De administrando imperio*, vividly express their authors' anxiety about the need to safeguard their information from the foreign (Arab) agents. Leo VI expressing his fear for foreign intelligence writes[14]:

Εἰσι δὲ καὶ ἕτερα τοῖς ἀρχαίοις ἐπινοηθέντα ἐν τῷ πλωΐμῳ πολέμῳ ἐπιτη-
δεύματα, καὶ ἔτι δὲ ἐπινοηθῆναι δυνάμενα, ὅπερ ἐν τῷ παρόντι γράφειν διὰ τὴν
συντομίαν ἀνοίκειον ἡγησάμεθα, τινὰ δὲ καὶ ἀσύμφορα διὰ τὸ μὴ φαυλίζεσθαι
τοῖς πολεμίοις καὶ μᾶλλον ἐκείνους χρῆσθαι αὐτοῖς καθ' ἡμῶν.

Constantine Porphyrogenitus, whose fear of information being leaked to the enemy is manifest, states that the liquid fire was given to the Byzantines by an angel to be used solely by Christians, whose duty was to keep it secret[15].

Unfortunately for the Byzantines their main naval manual, the *Naumachica* of Leo VI, which is actually part of his *Taktika*, had been at least partly translated into Arabic, and Ibn al-Manqali (Mangli) scornfully remarks «this is what he the Wise writes about such and such things but we know even more in addition to what he said»[16].

The Byzantines, like the Arabs, took special precautions in order to protect their ports and their anchored ships. Leo VI advised their commanders to use the utmost vigilance in such cases[17]. Of course, as a general principle this has never lost its validity. When Napoleon forgot it and left his fleet unprotected in Aboukir during his invasion of Egypt in 1798, Nelson was quick to attack and destroyed it.

For both Byzantines and Arabs, raids in war time were a commonplace. Yet they too let Arab cargo ships anchor in their ports provided that they were equipped with the proper credentials. The late tenth-century wreck of a Muslim ship recently found in Serçe Liman, Asia Minor, testifies to the freedom of trade in times of peace[18].

14. Leo VI, *Naumachica*, I, 72; ed. A. Dain, Paris 1943, p. 31.

15. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ed. G. Moravcsik, trans. R. J. Jenkins, Washington 1967, pp. 68-69.

16. V. Christides, *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs (ca. 824). A Turning Point in the Struggle between Byzantium and Islam*, Athens 1984, pp. 35-36.

17. *Naumachica*, I, 33; Dain, p. 25: Εἰ δέ ἐν τῇ πολεμίᾳ γῇ πλησιάζεις ἢ πολεμίους παρεῖναι που ἐλπίζεις, πάντως χρή σε βίγλας ἔχειν μακρόθεν καὶ κατὰ γῆν καὶ κατὰ θάλασσαν, καὶ ἀγρύπνως διατελεῖν καὶ κατησφαλισμένον καὶ ἕτοιμον εἶναι πρὸς παράταξιν. πολλαὶ γὰρ αἱ τῶν πολεμίων ἐπι-βουλαί. Καὶ γὰρ ἡ κατὰ γῆς εἰρόντες σε ὁρμοῦντα βιάζονται, εἰ τύχοι δὲ καὶ τάς ναῦς ἐμπρήσουσιν.

18. F. H. van Doorninck, Jr., «The Medieval Shipwreck at Serçe Liman: an Early 11th Century Fatimid-Byzantine Commercial Voyage», *Graeco-Arabica* 4 (1991), pp. 45-52.

Naturally trade and intelligence also went hand in hand in Byzantine territory. A number of Byzantine castles in the interior and on the coast were often taken by the Arabs with the cooperation of spies who had penetrated them, or of local collaborators[19].

An interesting passage in Kekaumenos' *Strategicon*, written in the eleventh century, offers us insights into the many facets involved in trade, spying, defense of castles, and traitors. Instructions concerning naval military intelligence are followed by examples of actual events. The advice appears in the form of orders to a commander of a castle. It is suggested on the one hand that he be aware of enemies trying to penetrate the castle but, on the other hand, that he permit any foreigners, including known enemies, to engage in commercial transactions but not close to the castle[20]:

Ἐὰν ἔλθῃ ἔθνος εἰς τὸ κάστρον σου καὶ ποιήσῃ ἀγάπην ... μὴ πιστεύεις αὐτῷ ... καὶ εἰ θελήσει ποιῆσαι πανήγυριν πωλεῖν τε καὶ ἀγοράζειν ποιησάτω πλὴν μὴ ἵστησι ταύτῃ σύννεγγυς τοῦ κάστρου.

The author goes on to describe an incident that took place in the city of Dimitrias (today's Volos)[21]. Five Arab ships arrived in the port seeking peace and trade instead of war. After an agreement was reached and they had begun selling their wares, a Byzantine traitor helped them to sack the town. It is a familiar story.

Scouting and Spying Ships. Commandos

The next question is what types of ships were used for spying. Here we must bear in mind that there is no distinction between scouting and spying ships. Not surprisingly, such ships existed in both the Arab and Byzantine fleets. But in both Greek and Arabic sources there are no detailed descriptions of such ships. It is obvious that these ships were not restricted to just one type.

Leo VI, in one passage, describes the spying-scouting ships, which he calls «galea», as one banked and swift[22]. In another passage speaking again about scouting and spying ships he divides them into two categories: the small swift dromons and the lighter vessels called «galea»[23].

The use of light dromons as scouting ships appears in the *Life of Saint Theodore of Cythera*, written in the middle of the tenth century, which gives us a glimpse of the overall situation in the Aegean at this period. It was the time of the

19. V. Christides, «Two Parallel Naval Guides of the Tenth Century: Qudāma's Document and Leo VI's Naumachica», pp. 99-100.

20. *Kekaumenou Strategikon*, ed. B. Wassiliewsky and V. Jernstedt, Amsterdam 1965, p. 33.

21. *Ibid*.

22. Leo VI, *Naumachica*, I, 10; Dain, p. 21.

23. Leo VI, *Naumachica*, I, 82; Dain, p. 33.

Arab occupation of Crete (ca. 824-961) in which great tension prevailed in the Aegean and there were repeated clashes on a small scale[24]. They were not full scale battles such as those between the Spanish armada and the British navy, but they were frequent. Of course, short periods of peace were arranged to permit the exchange of prisoners.

The Byzantine navy at that time, as N. Oikonomides, editor of the *Life of Saint Theodore of Cythera*, points out, was divided in two: half the ships remained in Constantinople, while the rest, the Thematic fleet, scouted in the Aegean[25].

In the *Life* we meet a squadron of four *chelandia*, scouting around the island of Cythera[26]. Scouting in four, two in front and two behind, had been suggested by Leo VI[27].

The *Life of Saint Theodore* calls the Byzantine scouting ships «chelandia». They carried a crew of ninety each. *Chelandion* is frequently a term used as a synonym for *dromon*, the average Byzantine warship. But as Ch. Makrypoulias has recently shown, *chelandion* could also mean, in a stricter sense, the lighter *dromon*[28]. The typical scouting ship is usually smaller and single-banked with a mast. Occasionally, this type of ship can be identified with the *myoparon*, which is depicted in a drawing in a Tunisian mocaic (3rd-4th c. A.D.) (Fig. 2, nº. 11)[29].

Turning to the Arab fleet we notice that the Arabic sources call their spying ships «jasus», but without any description of their structure and function. They report simply that the spy ships are used for exploration and gathering information[30].

The smallest type of spying scouting ship of the Arabs is the type of *shakhtur*, usually, but not always, a small single-banked ship with a mast. A larger ship used for scouting is of the type *bārij*. It is a swift craft which, according to Ṭabari, usually

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24. Christides, *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs*, passim; Idem, «From the Cycle The Conquest and Occupation of Crete by the Arabs' in Skylitzes' Illuminations: A Naval Battle and the Execution of General Crateros», *Studia Semitica Necnon Iranica*, dedicated to R. Macuch, (1989), pp. 53-64.

25. N. Oikonomides, «Ὁ βίος τοῦ Ἁγίου Θεοδώρου Κυθήρων (10ος αἰ.)», *Πρακτικά Τρίτου Πανιονίου Συνεδρίου*, vol. l, Athens 1967, pp. 276-277 (= *Byzantium from the Ninth Century to the Fourth Crusade*, London, Variorum Reprints, 1992, VII). See also Hélène Ahrweiler, *Byzance et la mer*, Paris 1966, 45 ff.

26. Oikonomides, «Ὁ βίος τοῦ Ἁγίου Θεοδώρου Κυθήρων (10ος αἰ.)», p. 287.

27. Leo VI, *Naumachica*, p. 25; Dain, p. 23. Actually Leo suggests 3-5 ships.

28. Ch. Makrypoulias, «The Navy in the Works of Constantine Porphyrogenitus», *Graeco-Arabica* 6 (1995), p. 162 ff. Similar to *myoparon* is the *sandalos* ; see Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De ceremoniis aulae byzantinae*, ed. I. I. Reiske, Bonn 1829, p. 659.

29. M. Reddé, *Mare nostrum*, Rome 1986, Fig. 8, no. 11.

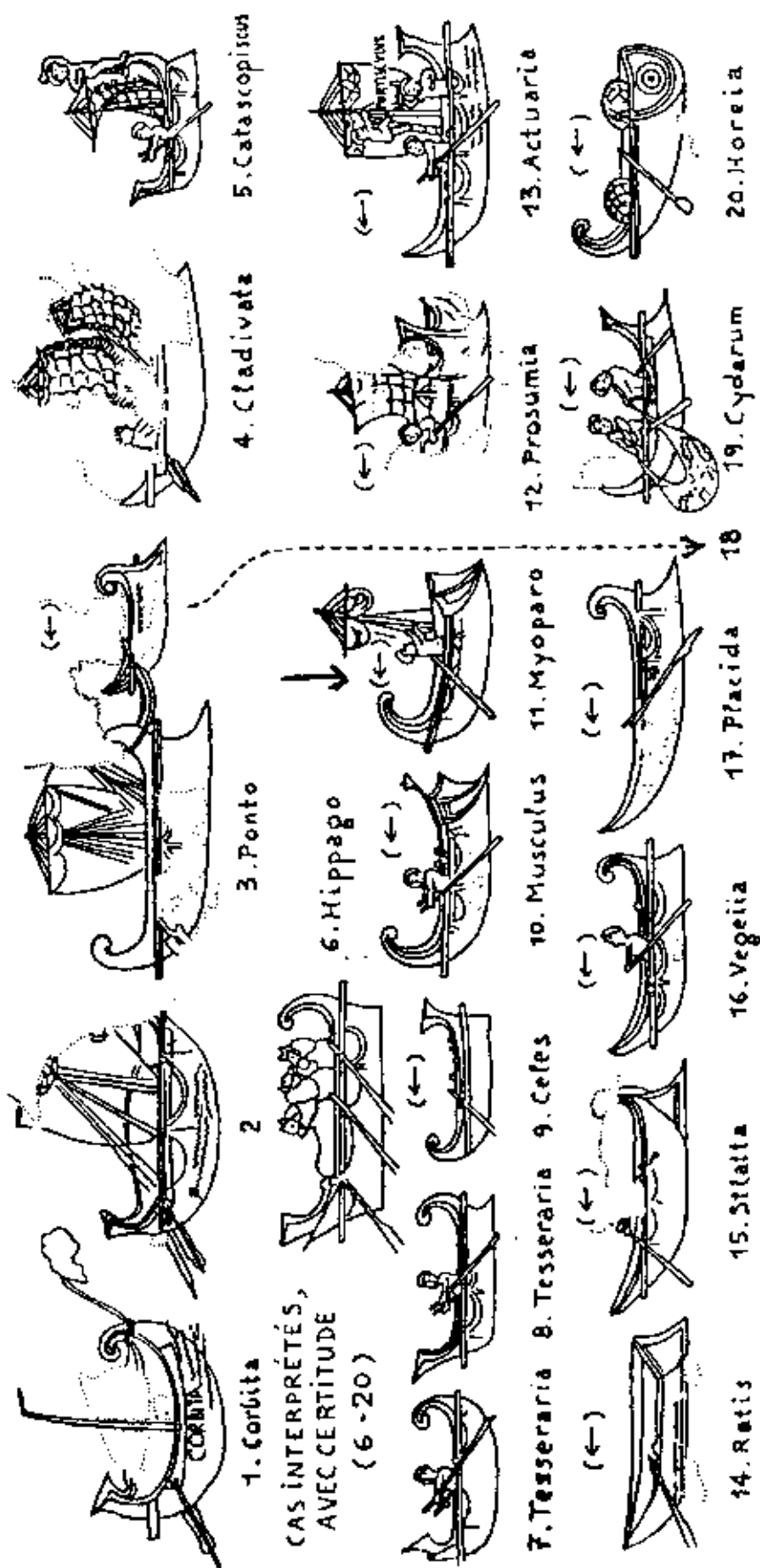30. D. Nakhili, *Al-Sufun al-Islamiyah*, Alexandria 1979, p. 21.

Fig. 2. Depiction of a ship of the type of *myoparon* (often used as a *kataskopos naus, speculatoris navis*). Mosaic of Althiburus in North Africa. Michel Reddé, *Mare Nostrum*, Rome 1986, Fig. 8,11.

carried about forty-five men: a governor (*ishtiyām*), three fire throwers (*nafāṭīn*), a carpenter (*najjār*), a baker (*khabbāz*) and thirty-nine oarsmen and marines (*jadāfīn, muqātila*)[31].

This is all the information I have been able to find about Arab and/or Byzantine spying ships and even our knowledge of the *dromon* and the correspondig Arab warship *shīnī* is still incomplete[32]. Iconography is only of little help since Byzantine and Arab drawings are sketchy (see Figs. 3, 4).

The only detailed information I have uncovered regarding spying ships and commandos concerns the early Byzantine or Late Roman period. Vegetius, the fourth-century author of *Epitoma Rei militaris* (Digest of Military Affairs) addressed to the Emperor Theodosius (383-395), describes the spy-scout ships of his time[33]. The scout boats had twenty oarsmen in single oar rooms. Their sails, ropes
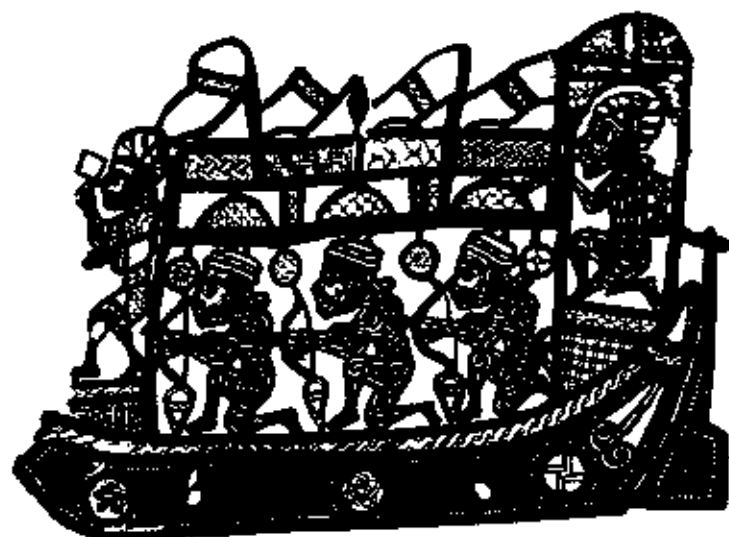

Fig. 3. Mamlouk warship (*shīnī*). Made of leather, depicting clearly
the stern rudder and the officer in front. According to the Greek
and Arabic sources he is armed. V. Christides, *The Conquest of
Crete by the Arabs*, Fig. 17

31. Ṭabari, *Ta'rikh*, XXI, ed. Beirut, n.d., p. 112.

32. M. Bonino, «Archeologia navale», *Storia di Ravenna*, II, 1, Ravenna 1991, 38 ff. For the *shīnī* see J. Lirola Delgado, *El poder naval de al-Andalus en la época del Califato Omeya*, Granada 1993, p. 296 ff. and my article «Shīnī», *Encyclopedia of Islam* 9 (^{2}1996), pp. 444-445. For the Byzantine *dromon* see J. H. Pryor, «From Dromon to Galea: Mediterranean Bireme Galleys A.D. 500-1300», G. Gardiner (ed.), *The Age of the Galley*, London 1995, pp. 101-116.

33. Vegetius, *Epitoma rei militaris*, ed. C. Lang, Leipzig 1885, Book IV, ch. 31-36. A translation of the relevant passages with a short commentary is found in W. W. Gauld, «Vegetius on Roman Scout-boats», *Antiquity* 64 (1990), pp. 402-406.
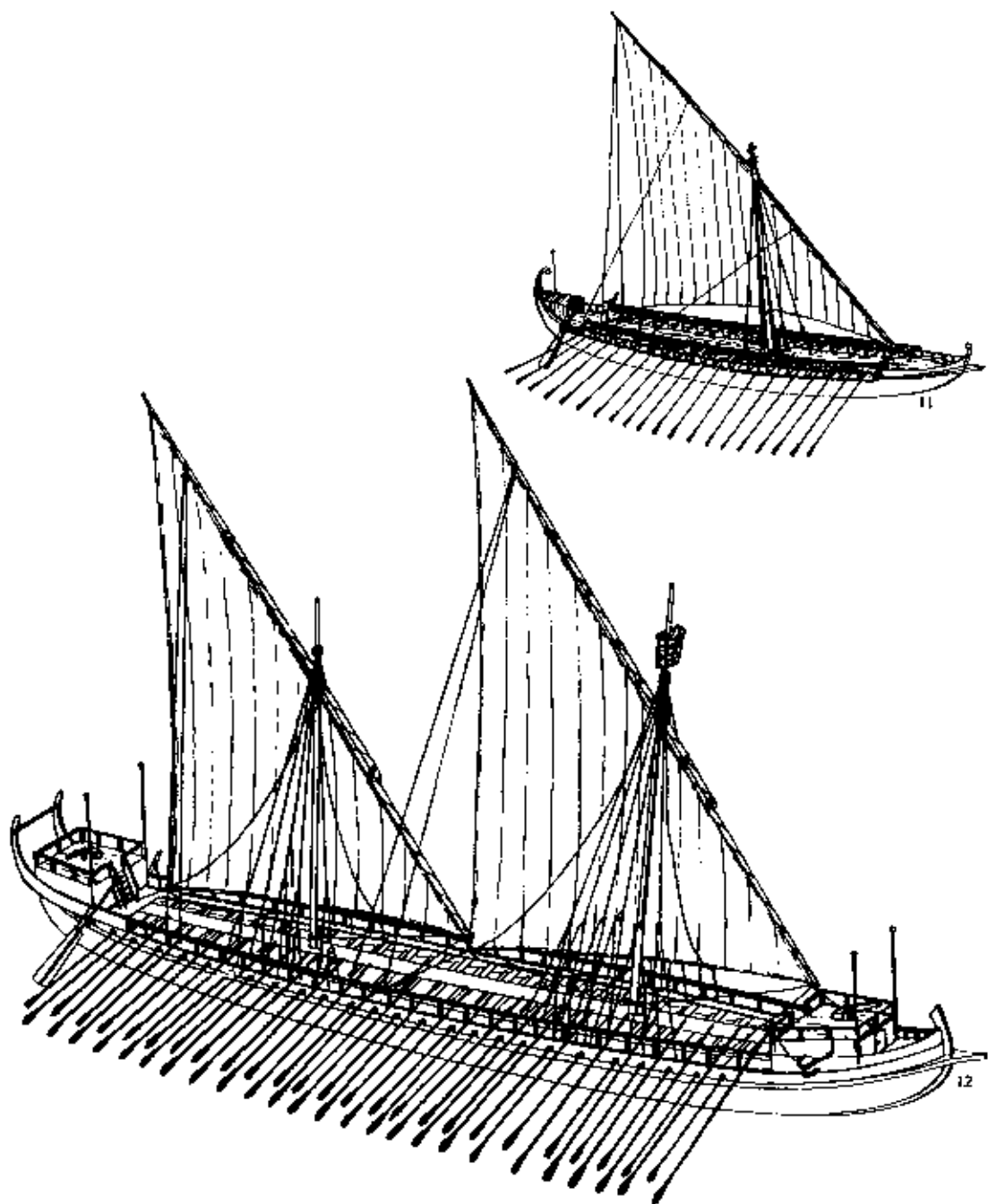
Fig. 4. Imaginary drawing of a Byzantine dromon by M. Bonino. Upper level 6th century, lower level 8th century. M. Bonino, «Archeologia navale», *in Storia di Ravenna II.1. Dall' età bizantina Territorio, economia e società*, Ravenna 1991, p. 41.

and hulls are colored venetus (blue). Since warships were fast at that time these boats were fast but proper camouflaging was even more important. Vegetius adds that the marines of these ships, a sort of commandos, wore venetus colored uniforms and were selected from the bravest men[34].

Commandos are also mentioned in the naval manual of Syrianus Magistrus[35], who describes their qualities and arms:

Κατὰ δὲ γῆν ἀποστέλλειν τοὺς μάλιστα κουφοτέρους τε καὶ ταχυτέρους τῶν ἄλλων. δεῖ δὲ πρὸς τούτοις αὐτοὺς εἶναι ὀξυδερκεῖς, εὐηκόους, ἐπιτηδείους πρός τε κατασκοπὴν καὶ ἀπαγγελίαν τῶν ὁραθέντων ἢ ἀκουσθέντων, μόνας τὰς μαχαίρας ἐπιφερομένους ...

In the Arabic sources the most illuminating description of the activities of commandos is reported by Ibn al-Qalānisī (d. 1160). He tells how a group of commandos embarked on Egyptian spy ships which were engaged in aggressive naval activities against the Crusaders' ships stationed in occupied Tyre. The Egyptian commandos were dressed like Crusaders and spoke their language fluently. They first approached a big enemy warship and having taken it by surprise they burned it[36]. Later they approached some pilgrim ships, captured, and destroyed them[37].

Further scrutiny of all relevant sources will surely disclose many other facets of naval intelligence during the Arabo-Byzantine rivalry, which lasted for centuries, from the foundation of the first Arabo-Islamic state (7th century) –which was the center of gravity of the Syro-Palestinian coast– until the navies of both parties were exhausted (ca. 14th century). Meanwhile, at the time of the Crusades, new maritime states in the Christian West emerged and developed rapidly, tipping the balance of power and finally acquiring supremacy.

I will end this discussion with two examples in which the use of naval intelligence can be inferred. In one of Muʿāwiyah's raids against Cyprus, the Arabs abandoned the island hastily when they were informed that the Byzantine admiral Kakorizos was coming against them with a formidable fleet[38]. Obviously, Arab spies in the Byzantine ports had managed to send the message[39]. In another case

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34. *Ibid.*

35. Syrianus Magistrus, *Naumachiae*, IV, 6; ed. Dain, p. 47.

36. Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Taʾrīkh Dimashq*, ed. S. Zakar, Damascus 1983, p. 510.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, Leipzig 1883, p. 344.

39. It is understood, based on many other similar direct or indirect references, that both Arabs and Byzantines used their intelligence before undertaking any serious naval expedition. See Christides, *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs*, p. 57 and note 133. See also Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *op. cit.*, p. 660.

when the Arabs besieged Constantinople in 717-718, a number of their ships manned by Christian Copts deserted the fleet and escaped to Byzantine territory, most probably having been in touch with Byzantine agents[40].

We must also take into consideration that naval intelligence –like any military intelligence– could be performed by agents who visited the enemy country on legitimate business –not only as merchants but moreover as ambassadors- and could easily gather information on ports and fleets[41].

Finally it should be mentioned that throughout the Arabo-Byzantine struggle, supremacy at sea –based on international sea trade and powerful navies– was of paramount importance and consequently maritime intelligence provided a major deterrent against serious challenge by any of the opponents.

Additional Note

It is to be noticed that Diodor of Sicily reports how the Athenians under Kimon used a similar stratagem with the one mentioned above by Ibn al- Qalānisī. They captured some Persian ships and embarked them, disguised as Persians. Thus the Athenians easily approached the enemy port and inflicted heavy casualties. Diodor of Sicily, XI, 61: ... ἐνεβίβασεν εἰς τάς αἰχμαλωτίδας ναῦς τῶν ἰδίων τοὺς ἀρίστους δοὺς τιάρας καὶ τὴν ἄλλην κατασκευὴν περιθεὶς περσικήν ... .

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40. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, p. 397: *Οἱ δέ τῶν δύο στόλων τούτων Αἰγύπτιοι καθ᾿ ἑαυτοὺς βουλευσάμενοι νυκτός τοῖς τῶν κατίνων σανδάλους ἄραντες ἐν τῇ πόλει προσέφυγον... .*

41. N. Koutrakou, «Diplomacy and Espionage: their Role in the Byzantine Foreign Relations», *Graeco-Arabica* 6 (1995), p. 144. It is noteworthy that Koutrakou in her excellent article (p. 129 ff.) reports that the Byzantines, like the Arabs, used wandering holy men as spies.