

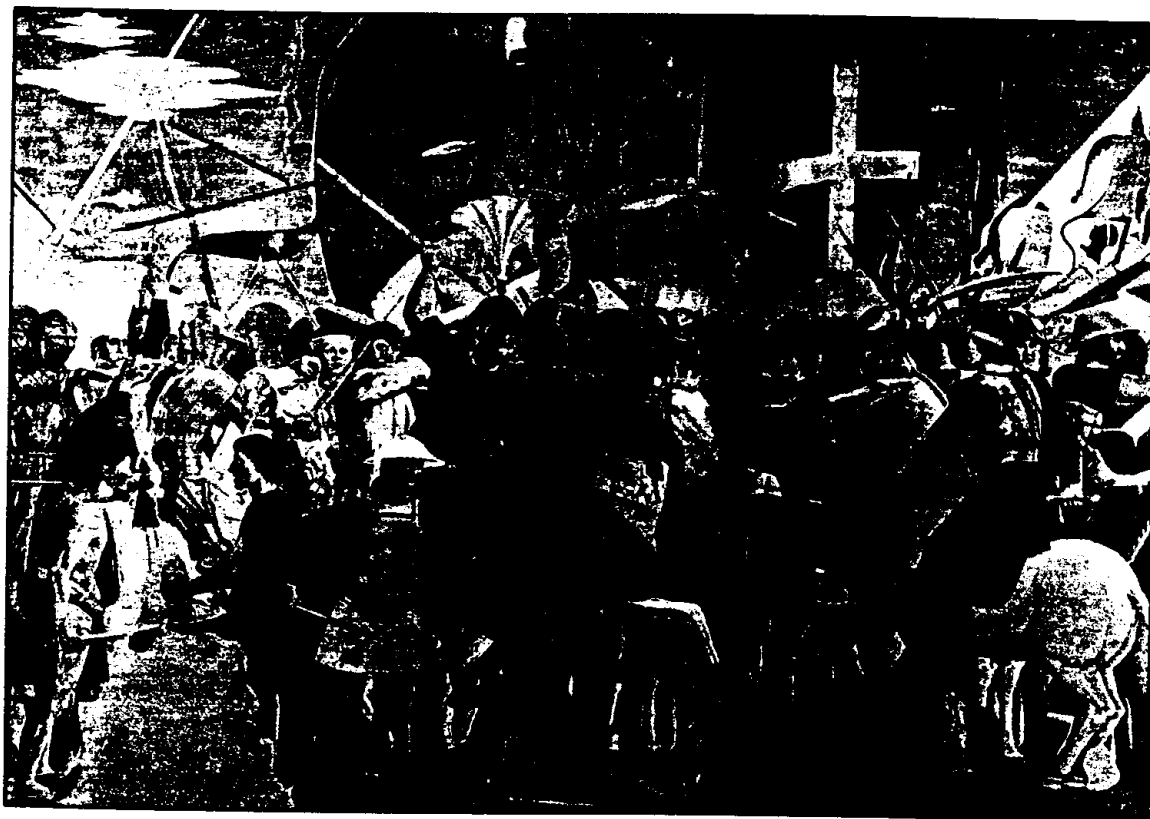


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Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes (left view) Fresco, 329 x 747 cm (full painting) c. 1460
San Francesco, Arezzo by Piero della Francesca

INTELLIGENCE & STATECRAFT -
ANCIENT PRACTICES AND LESSONS
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY PROFESSIONAL

THE BATTLE OF THE YARMÚK

Norman A. Bailey

PROLOGUE

During the twenty-five years between 602 and 627 AD the Roman and Persian empires fought their last and bitterest war in a conflict which dated back to the fifth century BC, when the Persians first invaded Greece. Since that time, in a struggle punctuated by periods of truce and indeed, substantial peaceful interaction, the Persian and the Graeco-Roman worlds were in a state of permanent conflict. It was an ideological as well as a typical geo-political/military conflict, since the Persians were followers of the monotheistic religion founded by the sixth century BC prophet Zoroaster while the Greeks and Romans worshipped a polytheistic pantheon of gods and goddesses, until the triumph of Christianity.

The last of this multisecular series of Perso-Roman wars was by far the most widespread and destructive of the entire process. First the Persians were triumphant, occupying all of Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt, sacking Jerusalem, conquering the empire's second and third cities, Alexandria and Antioch, and finally besieging Constantinople itself, along with their barbarian allies, the Avars. But then, under a dynamic new emperor, Heraclius, the empire reacted, drove the Persians out and pursued them into their own territory, taking and sacking their capital and principal cities, and pursuing the Persian king until he was murdered by his own entourage.

But in one of the great ironies of history, the final

triumph was of neither the Romans nor the Persians, but of a fanatical band of newly Islamicized inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula who in a remarkably short time defeated the Christian Romans and destroyed the Zoroastrian Persian state. History, of course, never exactly repeats itself, but the parallels between this seventh-century saga and now are striking. The multi-decade struggle between the western and Soviet blocs, after surging back and forth, ended in 1991 with the victory of the west. Nevertheless, some think the only remaining superpower is in fact at the mercy of forces which at least lay claim to the heritage of the tribal followers of the Arabian prophet that swept out of the desert thirteen centuries ago.

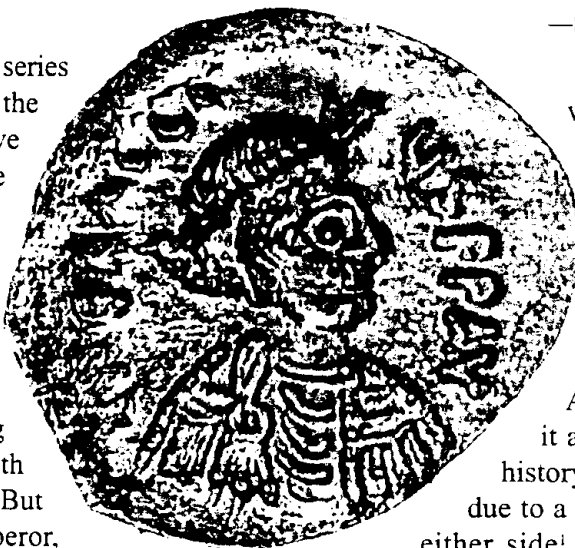
One God is announced to all. One Empire stands ready to receive and contain them—that is the Roman Empire.

By divine will two seeds have sprouted; they have thrust up from the soil and covered the world with their shadow. They are the Roman Empire and the Christian faith, and they are destined to unite the entire human race in the bonds of accord.

—Eusebius of Caesaria (4th C.)

Arrogance is divided into ten parts, nine of which are found in the Romans and one in all other peoples.

—Saying attributed to Mohammed



Byzantine Coinage — This tremissis of Heraclius was found in a hoard of solidi from Jerusalem/Cyprus. It has an extremely high relief obverse. The piece weighs 1.36g and has an interesting die break/collapse on the rear of Heraclius head.

On August 20, 636 A.D., a battle was fought in Syria between the Roman army and a Saracen force made up of allied Arab tribes which during the previous decade had been converted to the new monotheistic religion of the prophet: Mohammed. The overwhelming Arab victory in that battle marked it as one of the most significant in history, albeit one of the least known, due to a lack of eyewitness reports from either side¹ and a very sketchy historical record, dating primarily from writers no earlier than the eighth century, whether Byzantine or Arab.

The significance of the battle of the Yarmúk was two-fold: it marked the end of the classical world (in the words of the French historian Charles Diehl "La fin du monde antique") and the beginning of the middle

...contemporaries and future generations, it marked the beginning of the multi-secular struggle between the Christian and Moslem cultures, both claiming to be of universal scope and validity, which reached its military apex with the siege of Vienna in 1683, more than a thousand years later, and which in various, often violent forms, continues today.

The Roman Empire, the eastern and wealthier half of which survived the Barbarian invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries, was largely restored by the military campaigns of generals Belisarius and Narses during the reign of Emperor Justinian (527-565); once again it stretched from the Euphrates to Spain. The Vandal kingdom in North Africa and the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy were destroyed, and part of the Visigothic kingdom in Iberia was reincorporated into the Empire. Only the Franks in Gaul and the Saxons in England were untouched by Justinian's armies. To consolidate the restored empire, viceregal courts ("exarchates") were established in Ravenna for Italy and in Carthage for North Africa, the former Ostrogothic and Vandal capitals.

As Belisarius paraded down the "mese," the central avenue of Constantinople, in a celebration called a "triumph," dating back to the Roman Republic, it appeared that the days of Roman glory had returned. But the restoration was short-lived. In subsequent decades the Germanic Lombards invaded the Italian peninsula and took over large parts of the Exarchate of Ravenna. Savage tribes of Berbers harassed the southern flanks of the Exarchate of Carthage. Following the incursions of the Turkic Avars into the Balkans, numerous tribes of Slavic peoples occupied much of the peninsula as far south as the Peloponnese, effectively restricting Roman authority to cities and coastal areas.

In 602 the Emperor Maurice, beset on all sides, was overthrown by the Illyrian (Balkan) army, which set an ignorant, brutal non-commissioned officer named Phocas on the imperial throne. In his short reign of eight years, Phocas succeeded in bankrupting the empire, and had to face a massive invasion by Rome's traditional eastern rivals, the Persians. In 610, the Exarch of Carthage sent his son Heraclius, then

about 35 years old (his exact birth date unknown), with a naval force against Phocas, and his nephew Gregory with another army by land.

Heraclius reached Constantinople first and overthrew Phocas with the help of the Patriarch Sergios II, most of the Senate and one of the two "circus factions," the Greens (the circus factions were popular groups which supported chariot teams in the hippodrome—originally there had been four, but by the sixth century only two remained). The Blues had supported Phocas, and as a result Heraclius suppressed the factions, which played no subsequent role in history. Phocas was captured, had his hands cut off, was paraded through the streets and finally roasted alive in a bronze bull which was the centerpiece of the so-called "Forum of the Ox" (the bull was subsequently dismantled and melted down by order of Heraclius).



HERACLIUS, 610-641. Gold Solidus, S738v. Facing busts of Heraclius & Heraclius Constantine/Cross potent.

Heraclius inherited a mess. Not only had Phocas dissipated the empire's resources, but his cruelty and depredations of all kinds had weakened the empire and inspired the traditional enemies of Greece and then Rome, the Persians, to invade in 603, in the most serious and dangerous Persian war in a long series of

such conflicts stretching back more than a millennium. The Persian king of kings, Chosroes II, who had been befriended by Maurice, sent his generals Sharbaraz and Shahin into Mesopotamia and beyond under the pretext of punishing Phocas for overthrowing Maurice. Between 613 and 619, in the period of confusion and weakness following the downfall of Phocas, all Syria, Palestine and Egypt fell to the Persians, including all the most important cities of the empire except for the capital: Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria, seats of three of the five supreme leaders of Christianity (the others being Rome and Constantinople).

Noblest of the gods, King and Master of the whole earth, son of the great Hormisdas, Chosroes, to Heraclius his vile and insensate slave: Refusing to submit to our rule, you call yourself lord and sovereign. You seize and distribute our treasure, you deceive our servants. You never cease to annoy us with your bands of brigands. Have I not destroyed you Greeks? You say you trust in God, why then has he not delivered out of my hand Caesarea, Jerusalem,

...and I could not also destroy Constantinople.

Chosroes to Heraclius, c.622

The Roman army and navy were in a state of disintegration, and Heraclius, after consolidating his own position, devoted himself to reorganizing the state and the armed forces. In 619 he was able to sign a truce with the Avars and in 624 defeated three separate Persian armies, commanding personally, reaching the Euphrates, original frontier of the empire, in 625. In 626, the Persians, taking advantage of his distance from the capital, persuaded the Avars to break their truce with the Romans and jointly besiege Constantinople. In a series of lightning campaigns Heraclius lifted the siege, made an alliance with another Turkic people, the Khazars, utterly defeated the Persians and captured and destroyed their capital. The Persian ruler was overthrown and killed and on 14 September 628 a peace was signed that made Persia, for all practical purposes, a vassal state of Rome. Heraclius returned in triumph to Constantinople, and celebrated the last formal victory parade ever accorded to a Roman general or emperor. In 629 he entered Jerusalem, in a religious triumph worthy of comparison to his military/ political triumph the year before, bearing with him the true cross, which had been taken by the Persians when they captured and sacked the city in 614. He then settled down in the Near East to supervise the replacement of the Persian by the Roman authorities.

Thus by 629, nineteen years after seizing power, Heraclius appeared to have not only restored the ancient power and glory of Rome but to have definitively defeated the ancient hereditary enemy of the empire so that there appeared to be no significant challenge to the universal empire and the universal church eulogized by Eusebius in the fourth century. This last apogee of the multi-secular empire, however, was destined to be extremely short-lived. Two years before Heraclius' triumphant entry into Jerusalem bearing the true cross of Jesus discovered three centuries before by Helena, mother of the great Constantine, an obscure and obstinate Arab visionary fled from certain death at the hands of his enemies in his home city of Mecca to the more hospitable refuge of Medina, from where his new monotheistic doctrine spread by precept and sword throughout Arabia. The very next year, 628, as

Heraclius was destroying the Persian army and state, Christian Arabs killed a Moslem in the frontier town of Al-Rasas, in an area still occupied by the Persians. In retaliation, a Moslem band raided into Roman territory and was repelled by local levies at Mu'ta.

God gave this land [Palestine] to our father Abraham and to his posterity after him. We are the children of Abraham. You have possessed our land long enough. Cede it to us peacefully and we shall not invade your territory. If not, we shall take back from you with usurious interest what you have seized.

—Reported Moslem/Arab demand to Romans prior to the invasion of Palestine and Syria

The Arabs had been raiding into Roman territory for centuries, so little attention was paid to this incursion, especially since the local situation was chaotic

due to the recent Persian evacuation and incomplete Roman military and civil reoccupation. Mohammed died in 632 and his followers were quiescent during the Caliphate of his successor, the pacific and aged Abu Bakr. In 634, however, Abu Bakr died and was succeeded by the warlike Caliph Omar, the first in a series of militant Moslem/Arab religious leaders who eventually

expanded Moslem domains until they stretched from the Pyrenees to the borders of India.

Mohammed had been greatly impressed with Roman military prowess, and mentioned the Roman successes in the Qu'ran. This is hardly surprising, given the superhuman aura that surrounded Heraclius at the time, including his defeat of the Persian commander Razates in single combat at the battle of Nineveh. He seemed a second Alexander, and rulers as remote as the king of the Franks and Indian potentates had congratulated Heraclius on his triumph over the Persians.

The Romans have been defeated in a neighboring land. But in a few years they shall themselves gain victory such being the will of God before and after. On that day the believers will rejoice.

—Qu'ran, Sura XXX

But two decades of constant warfare had exhausted the Roman Empire and the Persians were prostrate. Additionally, Roman administrative and military reoccupation of the evacuated territories was incomplete



Emperor of Byzantium (610-641).

and the Persian invaders in any case had been welcomed and supported by many Jews and monophysite Christians in the recovered regions. Many years before Heraclius had been told by a soothsayer that "A circumcised people will overrun your empire"; he had taken that to mean the Jews, of course, but reality was otherwise. The emperor never led his armies personally again, but watched events from Jerusalem first, where he stayed from 634 to 636, and subsequently from Antioch, until it too fell to the Moslems.

Already in 634 the Arabs fought and won two formal battles with Roman-led local forces, at Dathin and Ajnadayn, and took the first sizeable locality, Aeropolis. In 635 Damascus was temporarily overrun by the forces of Omar and in 636 was fought one of the most significant and decisive battles in world history at the dry river ("Wadi") Yarmúk in southern Syria. The Roman army was annihilated and what remained was the mopping-up of isolated Roman garrisons, such as Gaza, and most significantly, Jerusalem, taken by the Arabs in 638, exactly ten years after being liberated from the Persians.

Behold the Abomination of Desolation, spoken of by the Prophet Daniel, that standeth in the Holy Place.

—Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem, upon the entry of the Caliph Omar onto the porch of the church of the Holy Sepulchre

Afterwards Antioch fell and Heraclius returned to Constantinople (having spent a total of seven years in the Near East) to organize the defenses of Asia Minor. Between 637 and 640 Mesopotamia was occupied by the Moslem armies, which went on to conquer Persia. In 639 Egypt was invaded and occupied and in 640 Armenia was invaded for the first time, representing the high-water mark of Arab expansion to the northeast.

Thus in the astonishingly short time of six years the Arabs had detached about a third of the Roman Empire, including the breadbasket province of Egypt, taken by the first Roman emperor from its last queen, Cleopatra, as well as the ancient cities of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. Simultaneously the Balkans had been largely overrun by Slavic tribes, much of Italy by the Lombards and Roman Spain had been retaken by the Visigoths, themselves to fall under Arab domination after the armies of the Prophet had swept through all of

North Africa, expelling on the way the Roman forces from Heraclius' home city of Carthage.

The battle of the Yarmúk followed a three-month period, from May to August, 636, during which the Roman commanders, Theodore the Sakellarios (a fiscal office) and the Armenian prince Vartan Mamikonian (the Heraklids were of Armenian origin, explaining among other things Heraclius' sympathy for the monophysite position in the theological disputes of that period) attempted to rally their heterogeneous force, made up of perhaps 80,000 soldiers in all, while attempting to supply the army despite the reluctance of the once-more Roman controlled city of Damascus to do so.

The governor may have been influenced by the reputation the Moslems were beginning to develop for highly imaginative behavior towards those who refused to submit. During this period the Roman commander

of the province of Palestrina III, who had prohibited trade between the inhabitants of the province and the Moslems, was made prisoner and killed by being suffocated in a drying (and thus shrinking) camel skin. The Roman garrison commander at Gaza tried to seize the leader of the

besieging forces through a ruse which didn't work. Subsequently the garrison was offered conversion or death. When they refused they were massacred to a man.

The delay, however, enabled the Moslems to concentrate the tribes to confront the motley Roman force, made up largely of Armenian infantry and Christian Arab auxiliary cavalry. When the armies finally met they were led by Vahan the Armenian (who had replaced Vartan upon the latter's death) and Theodore on the Roman side. Niketas, son of the Persian general Shahrbaraz, fought as an officer for the Romans. After the battle he tried to convert to Islam, but was refused and killed.

After some preliminary skirmishing, the battle took place on August 20th. As has been mentioned, of all the epochal battles in history, the Battle of the Yarmúk is perhaps the least known, due to a complete lack of contemporary reports, at least that have come down to us, from either side. Roman/ Byzantine authors considered the Arab conquests to have been a punishment from a Heaven angered by Roman pride

Roman/ Byzantine authors considered the Arab conquests to have been a punishment from a Heaven angered by Roman pride and sinfulness.

and many of the Moslems for their part considered the battle as very likely to be only the first of a series of pitched battles with the Romans. They could not imagine that the great empire, which had just destroyed the Persians, could be rendered militarily helpless by a single defeat, however overwhelming.

The defiled would not have achieved or gained such strength to be able to do and to utter such things, if we had not first insulted the gift [of God's grace] and if we had not first defiled the purification, and by this we injured the gift giving Christ and impelled this wrath against us.

—Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem

Many legends about the battle developed in both Byzantium and the Caliphate in the centuries following the battle. It is quite possible that some of them are based on stories passed down to subsequent generations by participants in the struggle, but that is impossible to know, since the earliest written accounts date from long after the event. The Battle of the Yarmūk ushered in the Byzantine dark ages, when all the resources of the empire were devoted to survival and to the internecine struggle, amounting to a civil war, between those who believed that the principal offense that had been committed against God consisted of idolatry—that is, the worship of icons, and those who defended that form of worship.

Some of the legends are that the battle took place during a sandstorm, which blew into the faces of the Romans, blinding them. Memory of such a thing, if true, would be likely to give rise to the idea that God's hand was against them. Another legend from the Arab side credited the Arab women, who were in camp, with stopping the retreating Arab troops during an early phase when the Romans were advancing. Arabic sources, also long after the event, reported that after the rout of the Romans, some of the officers simply sat down upon the field and waited to be killed. This too has the ring of a long-remembered striking incident.

Actual facts concerning the conduct of the battle are very sparse. The Moslems withdrew from Damascus and intervening regions, drawing the Roman forces into the valley of the Yarmūk. An initial Roman cavalry

charge (the Roman cavalry was made up of Christian Arabs of the tribe of the Ghassanids) had some effect, but served to open the Roman center to a Moslem counter-thrust, which took place as a result without defensive cavalry support. The Moslem cavalry then captured a strategic bridge and separated the wings of the Roman army. Christian Arab forces then began to desert or join the Moslems and the battle turned into a rout. Less than one-fifth of the Roman forces succeeded in fleeing to safety in the vicinity of Hims. The initial Arabic thrust following the battle met such little organized opposition that one column penetrated as far north as Melitene in Anatolia, which surrendered without a fight. When the Romans retook the city, they destroyed it by order of the emperor as punishment for its treachery.

Heraclius organized the withdrawal of the remnants of the Roman forces from the battle as well as from Mesopotamia, over run at about the same time, as the Moslems moved towards Persia and the decisive battle of Qadisiyya, which put an end to the millennial Zoroastrian empire. Once the fleeing soldiers and civilians (thousands of Christian Arabs fled to Anatolia) had reached the relative safety of the Taurus mountains in south western Asia Minor, Heraclius moved from Antioch back to Constanti-



The Emperor Heraclius Carries the Cross to Jerusalem
Artist - Michele di Matteo Lambertini

nople and began to organize the defense of Anatolia on the line of the Taurus mountains. From that time on for centuries, raiding took place across the mountains in both directions. Eventually, by the eleventh century, the Byzantines had retaken Antioch and additional areas of Syria and Mesopotamia, but for all practical purposes the Taurus remained the impregnable barrier after various Arab sieges of Constantinople had failed to take the city and were not renewed after 718.

Instead, Arab expansion was forced west across North Africa, through Egypt and the Exarchate of Carthage, and eventually in 711 across the Straits of Gibraltar and the occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. Caliph Omar, after peacefully occupying Jerusalem, and being shown the city and its monuments by Patriarch Sophronius, began a correspondence with Heraclius, demanding the return of the Christian Arabs who had fled into Anatolia with the retreating

imperial forces. Eventually Omar and Heraclius even exchanged gifts for their respective wives (perfume for the empress and a necklace for Omar's wife).

Thus began the long and complex relationship between the Caliphate and the empire, often bloody, but also often friendly, with exchanges of scholars and trade, and eventually the erection of a mosque in Constantinople (scandalizing the Crusaders). But now the Roman Empire was no more and neither was the world of antiquity. They had been replaced in the eastern Mediterranean by the Byzantine Empire and the medieval world. Until the 630s, Latin was the official language of the empire, men were largely clean-shaven, dress was not dissimilar to the classical Roman, the hippodrome was the center of the capital, the circus factions and the Senate wielded real power, military and civil officials had Latin titles and the Roman provincial administrative system was largely still in place. When Heraclius took the imperial throne from Phocas in 610, hailed in the Hippodrome as "Augustus and Caesar," that throne was the seat of the Roman Emperor, in an unbroken line stretching back more than six hundred years to Augustus Caesar, adoptive nephew of the great Julius and founder of the policy that occupied eventually all of the occidental world and which had no serious rival for centuries, except for Persia. When he died, sick, old and disillusioned, now called "Basileus," in 641, the Roman Empire was no more. Greek was the official language, men wore beards, dress aped Persian fashions, circus factions were gone, the Senate was shorn of all real power, and the provinces were replaced by a military/civil subdivision called a "Theme."

The Roman Empire was succeeded by the medieval polity known as Byzantium after the original Greek name of Constantinople (although the Byzantines continued to refer to themselves, as did the Arabs and later the Turks, as Romans, and all three peoples called all Western Europeans of whatever nationality "Franks") and all subsequent emperors, from Heraclius' son Heraclonas to the last Byzantine ruler, Constantine XI Paleologus, who died defending the walls of Constantinople from the Ottoman Turks in 1453, were rulers of a medieval polity, albeit the only one which could legitimately claim to be the successor state to the Republic and Empire of Rome.

*The spider weaves the curtains in the
palace of the Caesars; the owl calls the watches
in the towers of Afrasiab.*

—Sultan Mehmet II upon visiting the

ruined imperial palace in Constantinople,
May, 1453

On September 11, 2001, one thousand three hundred and sixty-six years later, the latest battle in this never-ending war was fought, and it may be that the number of casualties was about the same as at a dry riverbed in Syria on August 20, 636. ☹

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ADDITIONAL READING

Walter E. Kaegi, *BYZANTIUM AND THE EARLY ISLAMIC CONQUESTS*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1992, gives by far the most complete easily available summary of the earliest Moslem conquests in the Middle East, including as detailed a description of the battle of the Yarmūk as possible given the scarcity of sources.

J. F. Haldane, *BYZANTIUM IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, provides the most extensive scholarly defense of the thesis that the Roman Empire and the classical world ended and the Byzantine Empire and the medieval world began during the reign of the Emperor Heraclius.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Armenian chronicler Sebeos claimed to have interviewed survivors of battles against the Moslems, but these were probably skirmishes in Mesopotamia.

**Fighting terrorism
is like being a goalkeeper.
You can make a hundred brilliant saves
but the only shot that people remember
is the one that gets past you.**

— Paul Wilkinson (b. 1937) British scholar