



Summary :

On the 11th of June 806, the Arab caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd campaigned against Cappadocia, in charge of a large army. He captured Tyana, Andrasos, Malakopea, Sideropalos, Kyzistra, Herakleia and Thebasa. These victories eventually forced the emperor Nikephoros I to sign an unfavourable for the Byzantines peace treaty with the Arabs which, however, he violated later.

Date

11th June - autumn 806

Geographical Location

Cappadocia

1. Historical background

In the beginning of the 9th century the [struggle between the Byzantines and the Arabs](#) was escalating, because of the refusal of the emperor [Nikephoros I](#) to continue paying the Arabs the annually submission tax which was agreed by the empress [Eirene](#) and the caliph al-Mahdi in 782.¹ To this decision, which forms part of the general effort of Nikephoros to strengthen the economy of Byzantium, the Arabs reacted immediately, and already in 803 they launched raids on byzantine territory. The responsibility of the [defence of the eastern frontier](#) was given to [Vardanes](#), the so-called Tourkos (Turk), [strategos](#) of the [thema](#) of [Anatolikon](#) and also [monostrategos](#) of the five [themata of Asia Minor](#). The former, however, [mutinied](#), on the 19th of July 803, against Nikephoros I and, although his movement was soon -in approximately two months- oppressed, this weakened the defence of the empire in a certain degree. Thus, in August 804, a new Arab attack resulted in a defeat of the Byzantine army, under the direct command of emperor Nikephoros, at Krassos of [Phrygia](#).

However, problems in the area of Chorasān² prevented the caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd, successor of al-Mahdi to continue the fight against the Byzantines and he preferred to sign a peace treaty with them. In the time to follow, Nikephoros took advantage of the inactivity of the Arab caliph and strengthened the defence of Asia Minor, building or repairing [fortifications](#) at [Ankara](#), Andrasos and Thebasa,³ whereas the Byzantine troops launched raids in [Cilicia](#) and [Melitene](#), which was under Arab control since the middle of the 8th century. As soon as Hārūn ar-Rashīd solved his problems in Chorasān (November 805), he started the preparations for a campaign against [Cappadocia](#), in order to stop the strengthening of the Byzantine position in this area and to stop their advance towards the east, which seemed probable.

2. Beginning and outcome of the campaign

On June 11, 806 the Arab caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd, having gathered in Rakka of Mesopotamia a large army,⁴ launched his campaign against the region of Cappadocia, along the Arab-Byzantine frontier. Through the Gates of Cilicia Hārūn invaded the imperial territory and seized [Tyana](#), where he built fortifications and erected a mosque. Then, a part of the Arab army moved towards the north, conquered Andrasos, [Malakopea](#), Sideropalos and Kyzistra and advanced as far as Ankara, without, however, conquering the city.⁵ Meanwhile, Hārūn ar-Rashīd advanced towards the west and, after a siege that lasted one month, conquered [Heraclea](#) (between August 20 and September 17), as well as the nearby city of Thebasa. The fall of Herakleia was followed by the city's sack and destruction, whereas the inhabitants were imprisoned and deported from the city. In order to face the Arab attacks in Asia Minor, Nikephoros organized a campaign against them, led by himself,⁶ but the numerical superiority of his adversary forced the emperor to come into negotiations for the signing of a peace treaty. The Byzantine embassy was comprised of three clerics, led by [Michael](#), [metropolitan of Synada](#).⁷



According to the unfavourable for the Byzantines [peace treaty](#) signed, Nikephoros was obliged to pay the Arabs immediately, but also annually from that year on, 30,000 pieces of gold,⁸ in which six more coins were added, three as a poll tax for him and three for his son and co-emperor Stavrakios. Also, he pledged not to rebuild Herakleia or any other Byzantine fort which was destroyed by the Arabs during this campaign. In exchange to all this, Hārūn ar-Rashīd agreed to withdraw his forces from the Byzantine territory.

3. Consequences

Probably the most severe blow by the campaign of Hārūn ar-Rashīd in Cappadocia in 806, was the temporary seizure of the fort of Herakleia, which controlled the road the Arabs often followed during their raids, that is from the Gates of Cilicia towards the hinterland of the Byzantine Empire. The Arabs apparently gave special importance to the seizure of Herakleia,⁹ probably because they greatly appreciated the importance of this specific fort.

In reality, however, although Hārūn ar-Rashīd attacked the Byzantine Empire leading a large military force, his operation did not cost important casualties to the Byzantines, since after the withdrawal of the Arabs, Nikephoros violated the treaty and rebuilt the destroyed forts, whereas at the same time he refused to pay the conditioned tax again. Besides, the death of Hārūn ar-Rashīd in 809 and the subsequent domestic unrest in the Caliphate favoured the Byzantines.

Nevertheless, even this brief seizure of important forts of Asia Minor by the Arabs proved their military superiority against the Byzantines, something which suspended Nikephoros' plans to expand his power to the east. Thus, in the rest of his reign, Nikephoros never organized any military operation in Asia Minor against the Arabs again, focusing his foreign policy on the Balkan region.

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1. According to this treaty, the annual tax which the Byzantines had to pay to the Arabs reached the amount of 70,000 (or 90,000) denars.
 2. The great discontent towards the governor of the province of Chorasán (today NE Iran) forced the caliph to personally visit the area (April 805).
 3. Nikephoros wanted to strengthen the forts which were under the constant attacks by the Arabs, as they were near the borders with Cilicia, the usual starting point of the Arab raids. More specifically, however, it is possible that the fortifications of Ankara had been damaged by the raids of 799, whereas Thebasa was ruined after its conquest by the Arabs in 793.
 4. It numbered 135,000 men and, according to W. T. Treadgold (*The Byzantine Revival 780-842* [Stanford 1988], p. 144), it was the largest army mustered during the time of the Abbasids. Theophanes, on the other hand, in his *Chronography* (ed. de Boor, C., *Theophanis Chronographia* [Leipzig 1883], p. 482, 3) mentions 300,000 men, a number considered excessive also by Αικατερίνη Χριστοφιλοπούλου (*Βυζαντινή Ιστορία 2/1: 610-867* [Thessaloniki 1993], p. 174).
 5. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. de Boor C., *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), p. 482, 7-8.
 6. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. de Boor C., *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), p. 482, 8-10. The exact date of the campaign remains uncertain.
 7. The other two clerics were the abbot of the monastery of Goulaïos and the steward of the metropolis of Amastris: Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. de Boor C., *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), p. 482, 11-12.
 8. The Arab historian al-Tabari mentions 50,000 pieces of gold and extra four for Nikephoros and two for Stavrakios. This information has been accepted by R. J. H. Jenkins (*Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries (AD 610-1071)* (London 1966), p. 120.



9. The impact this event had on Arab sources is analogous to the later seizure of Amorion (838) by the caliph Mutasim, which was indeed an important event. On the contrary, the Byzantine historians do not distinguish the fall of Herakleia from the fall of the rest of the forts of Cappadocia.

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Glossary :

	caliph
The supreme religious and political authority of Muslims, considered successor of Muhammad (Arabic: khalifa = deputy). He was the head of the Caliphate, the religious state of the Arabs.	
	monostrategos
A term used in Byzantine sources to denote a theme's general when the latter, apart from leading his own troops, also took command of neighbouring themes, either to better organise defence in a broad front or to conduct offensive operations under a unified command.	
	strategos ("general")
During the Roman period his duties were mainly political. Office of the Byzantine state's provincial administration. At first the title was given to the military and political administrator of the themes, namely of the big geographic and administrative unities of the Byzantine empire. Gradually the title lost its power and, already in the 11th century, strategoi were turned to simple commanders of military units, responsible for the defence of a region.	



theme

A Byzantine term that signifies wide military and administrative units under the administration of a strategos (general). The institution was consolidated in the 7th century and was characteristic for the organization and the division of Byzantine Empire at the Middle Byzantine period. The term applies also to the army unit that resided in each administrative unit and was staffed by farmer-soldiers. The thematic system was maintained until the end of Byzantine period. However, in the Later Byzantine period it was used in order to declare mostly tax units.

Sources

Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, C. (Leipzig 1883), p. 482.1-23.

Quotations

The Byzantine chronographer Theophanes describes the Arab campaign of 806

Τῷ δ' αὐτῷ ἔτει ἐπεστράτευσεν Ἀαράων, ὁ τῶν Ἀράβων ἀρχηγός, τὴν Ῥωμανίαν ἐν δυνάμει βαρεία ἀπὸ τε Μαυροφόρων καὶ Συρίας καὶ Παλαιστίνης καὶ Λιβύης χιλιάδων τ'. καὶ ἐλθὼν εἰς Τύανα ἄκοδομησεν οἶκον τῆς βλασφημίας αὐτοῦ. καὶ πολιορκήσας παρέλαβεν τὸ τε Ἡρακλέως κάστρον ὀχυρώτατον πάνυ ὑπάρχον καὶ τὴν Θήβασαν καὶ τὴν Μαλακοπέαν καὶ τὴν Σιδηρόπαλον καὶ τὴν Ἀνδρασόν. ἀπέστειλε δὲ κούρσον χιλιάδας ξ', καὶ κατήλθεν ἕως Ἀγκύρας, καὶ ἰστορήσας ταύτην ὑπέστρεψεν. ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς Νικηφόρος φόβῳ καὶ ἀμηχανίᾳ συσχεθεὶς ἐξῆλθε καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν ἀπογνώσει, τὰ γενναῖα τῆς ταλαιπωρίας ἐπιδεικνύμενος· καὶ πολλὰ τρόπαια ποιήσας ἀπέστειλε πρὸς Ἀαράων τὸν μητροπολίτην Συνάδων καὶ Πέτρον, τὸν ἡγούμενον τοῦ Γουλαίου, καὶ Γρηγόριον, τὸν οἰκονόμον Ἀμάστρης, αἰτῶν εἰρήνην γενέσθαι· καὶ πολλὰ διαλεχθέντων αὐτῶν ἐστοίχησαν τὴν εἰρήνην, ἵνα τὸ κατ' ἔτος τελεῖται αὐτοῖς ἀνὰ λ' χιλιάδων νομίσματα καὶ τρία νομίσματα κεφαλιῶν αὐτοῦ τοῦ βασιλέως, καὶ τρία τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ. ἃ καὶ δεξάμενος Ἀαράων ἤσθη καὶ ἠγαλλιάσατο ὑπὲρ μυρίων ταλάντων ταῦτα δεξάμενος, ὡς ὑποτάξας τὴν Ῥωμαίων βασιλείαν. ἐστοίχησαν δὲ καὶ τὰ παραληφθέντα κάστρα μὴ κτισθῆναι. ὑποστρεψάντων δὲ τῶν Ἀράβων, ἔκτισεν εὐθέως τὰ αὐτὰ κάστρα καὶ καταχύρωσεν. καὶ τοῦτο μαθὼν Ἀαράων, ἀποστείλας πάλιν ἔλαβε τὴν Θήβασαν, καὶ πέμψας στόλον εἰς Κύπρον τὰς τε ἐκκλησίας κατέστρεψε καὶ τοὺς Κυπρίου μετέστησε καὶ πολλὴν ἄλωσιν ποιήσας τὴν εἰρήνην διέστρεψεν.

Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, C. (Leipzig 1883), p. 482.1-23.

Chronological Table

November 805: the Arab caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd begins preparations for war

11 June 806: beginning of the campaign of the Hārūn ar-Rashīd against Cappadocia

between 20 August - 17 September 806: seizure and destruction of Herakleia by the Arabs

after 17 September 806: campaign of emperor Nikephoros I against Hārūn ar-Rashīd. A peace treaty is signed between the emperor and the Arab emir