

= Abbasid invasion of Asia Minor (782) =

The Abbasid invasion of Asia Minor in 782 was one of the largest operations launched by the Abbasid Caliphate against the Byzantine Empire . The invasion was launched as a display of Abbasid military might in the aftermath of a series of Byzantine successes . Commanded by the Abbasid heir @-@ apparent , the future Harun al @-@ Rashid , the Abbasid army reached as far as Chrysopolis , across the Bosphorus from the Byzantine capital , Constantinople , while secondary forces raided western Asia Minor and defeated the Byzantine forces there . As Harun did not intend to assault Constantinople and lacked ships to do so , he turned back .

The Byzantines , who in the meantime had neutralized the detachment left to secure the Abbasid army 's rear in Phrygia , were able to trap Harun 's army between their own converging forces . The defection of the Armenian general Tatzates , however , allowed Harun to regain the upper hand . The Abbasid prince sent for a truce and detained the high @-@ ranking Byzantine envoys , who included Empress Irene 's chief minister , Staurakios . This forced Irene to agree to a three @-@ year truce and pay a heavy annual tribute . Irene then focused her attention to the Balkans , but warfare with the Arabs resumed in 786 , until mounting Arab pressure led to another truce in 798 , on terms similar to those of 782 .

= = Background = =

Taking advantage of the internal difficulties of the Umayyad Caliphate that resulted from the civil wars of the 740s and the subsequent Abbasid Revolution , the Byzantines under Emperor Constantine V (reigned 741 ? 775) were able to regain the initiative on their eastern borders from the Arabs , and pursued an aggressive strategy . With the gradual consolidation of the Abbasid regime in the 760s and 770s , the situation became more balanced : the Arabs resumed their large @-@ scale raids deep into Asia Minor , although the Byzantines were still capable of major counterstrikes . Thus in 778 , the Byzantines , under Michael Lachanodrakon , seized the town of Germanikeia (Ma 'rash) , where they captured significant amounts of booty and took many Syrian Christians captive , and defeated an army sent against them by the Abbasid general Thumama ibn al @-@ Walid . In the next year , the Byzantines took and razed the fortress city of Hadath , forcing Caliph al @-@ Mahdi (r . 775 ? 785) to replace the rather passive Thumama with the veteran al @-@ Hasan ibn Qahtaba . Hasan led over 30 @,@ 000 troops in an invasion of Byzantine territory , but the Byzantines offered no opposition and withdrew to well @-@ fortified towns and refuges , until a lack of supplies forced Hasan to return home without achieving much .

In response to these Byzantine successes , Caliph al @-@ Mahdi now resolved to take the field in person . On 12 March 780 , Mahdi departed Baghdad and via Aleppo marched to Hadath , which he refortified . He then advanced to Arabissus , where he left the army and returned to Baghdad . His son and heir Harun ? better known by his laqab , or regnal name , al @-@ Rashid ? was left in charge of one half of the army , which raided the Armeniac Theme and took the small fort of Semaluos . Thumama , who had been entrusted with the other half , penetrated deeper into Asia Minor . He marched west as far as the Thracesian Theme , but was heavily defeated there by Lachanodrakon . In June 781 , as the Arab invasion force assembled at Hadath under Abd al @-@ Kabir , a great @-@ great @-@ nephew of the Caliph Umar (r . 634 ? 644) , and again prepared to launch their annual raid , Empress Irene called up the thematic armies of Asia Minor and placed them under the eunuch sakellarios John . The Muslims crossed into Byzantine Cappadocia over the Pass of Hadath , and were met near Caesarea by the combined Byzantine forces under Lachanodrakon . The ensuing battle resulted in a costly Arab defeat , forcing Abd al @-@ Kabir to abandon his campaign and retreat to Syria .

This defeat infuriated the Caliph , who prepared a new expedition . Intended as a show of force and a clear display of the Caliphate 's superiority , it was the largest army sent against Byzantium in the second half of the 8th century : it allegedly comprised 95 @,@ 793 men , about twice the total Byzantine military establishment present in Asia Minor , and cost the Abbasid state some 1 @.@ 6 million nomismata , almost as much as the Byzantine Empire 's entire annual income . Harun was

the nominal leader , but the Caliph took care to send experienced officers to accompany him .

= = Campaign = =

On 9 February 782 , Harun departed Baghdad ; the Arabs crossed the Taurus Mountains by the Cilician Gates , and swiftly took the border fortress of Magida . They then advanced along the military roads across the plateau into Phrygia . There , Harun left his lieutenant , the hadjib al @-@ Rabi ' ibn Yunus , to besiege Nakoleia and guard his rear , while another force , reportedly 30 @,@ 000 men , under al @-@ Barmaki (an unspecified member of the powerful Barmakid family , probably Yahya ibn Khalid) , was sent to raid the rich western coastlands of Asia Minor . Harun himself , with the main army , advanced to the Opsician Theme . The accounts of subsequent events in the primary sources (Theophanes the Confessor , Michael the Syrian , and al @-@ Tabari) differ on the details , but the general course of the campaign can be reconstructed .

According to Warren Treadgold , the Byzantine effort seems to have been led by Irene 's chief minister , the eunuch Staurakios , whose strategy was to avoid an immediate confrontation with Harun 's huge army , but wait until it had split up and advanced to meet its various detachments independently . The Thracesians under Lachanodrakon confronted al @-@ Barmaki at a place called Darenos , but were defeated and suffered heavy losses (15 @,@ 000 men according to Theophanes , 10 @,@ 000 according to Michael the Syrian) . The outcome of al @-@ Rabi 's siege of Nakoleia is unclear , but he was probably defeated ; Theophanes 's phrasing may imply that the town was taken , but Michael the Syrian reports that the Arabs suffered great losses and failed to capture it , a version of events confirmed by hagiographic sources . Al @-@ Tabari reports that part of the main army under Yazid ibn Mazyad al @-@ Shaybani met a Byzantine force led by a certain Niketas who was " count of counts " (perhaps the Count of the Opsician Theme) , probably somewhere near Nicaea . In the ensuing battle , Niketas was wounded and unhorsed in single combat with the Arab general and forced to retire , probably to Nicomedia , where the imperial tagmata (professional guard regiments) under the Domestic of the Schools Anthony were assembled . Harun did not bother with them , and advanced to the town of Chrysopolis , across the Bosphorus Strait from Constantinople itself . Lacking ships to cross the Bosphorus , and with no intention of assaulting Constantinople in the first place , Harun probably intended this advance only as a show of force .

Furthermore , despite his success so far , Harun 's position was precarious , as the defeat of al @-@ Rabi threatened his lines of communication with the Caliphate . Consequently , after plundering the Byzantine capital 's Asian suburbs , Harun turned his army back , but during his march along the valley of the Sangarius River , east of Nicaea , he was surrounded by the forces of the tagmata under Anthony in his rear and of the Bucellarians under their general Tatzates to his front . Fortunately for him , at this point Tatzates , an Armenian prince who had defected from his Arab @-@ ruled homeland to the Byzantines in 760 and was closely associated with the iconoclast regime of Constantine V , secretly made contact with him . Tatzates offered to aid Harun in exchange for a pardon and a safe return for himself and his family to his native Armenia . Theophanes explains Tatzates 's actions with his hostility towards Irene 's favourite , Staurakios , but this evidently masks a broader dissatisfaction with Irene 's regime . As Ralph @-@ Johannes Lilie writes , " Tatzates did not see any big opportunities for himself under the new regime and indeed used the good chance that the situation offered him . "

Thus , when Harun asked for negotiations , Irene dispatched a delegation of three of her most senior officials : the Domestic Anthony , the magistros Peter , and Staurakios himself . Confident of their military position , they neglected to secure promises for their safety or hostages of their own , so that when they arrived in the Arab camp , they were made prisoners . Coupled with the treachery of Tatzates and the unreliability of the troops under his command , Irene was now forced to negotiate for their release , especially of her trusted aide Staurakios .

The two states concluded a three @-@ year truce in exchange for a heavy annual tribute ? the Arab sources mention various amounts between 70 @,@ 000 and 100 @,@ 000 gold nomismata , while one also adds 10 @,@ 000 pieces of silk . Tabari 's account records that the tribute amounted

to " ninety or seventy thousand dinars " , to be paid " at the beginning of April and in June every year " . In addition , the Byzantines were obliged to provide provisions and guides for Harun 's army on its march home , and to hand over Tatzates 's wife and property . Harun released all his captives (5 @,@ 643 according to Tabari) , but kept the rich plunder he had gathered , and returned to the Caliphate in September 782 . Tabari , in his account of the expedition , says that Harun 's forces captured 194 @,@ 450 dinars in gold and 21 @,@ 414 @,@ 800 dirhams in silver , killed 54 @,@ 000 Byzantines in battle and 2 @,@ 090 in captivity and took over 20 @,@ 000 riding animals captive while slaughtering 100 @,@ 000 cattle and sheep . Tabari also reports that the amount of plunder was such that " a work horse was sold for a dirham and a mule for less than ten dirhams , a coat of mail for less than a dirham , and twenty swords for a dirham " ? at a time when one to two dirhams was the usual daily salary of a labourer or soldier .

= = Aftermath = =

The successful Arab invasion had important repercussions in Byzantium . The outcome represented a major blow to Empress Irene 's prestige , while Tatzates , a capable and veteran leader , was lost to the Empire and became the ruler of his native Armenia for the Abbasids . On the other hand , despite the humiliating peace treaty , Byzantium 's losses were not excessive , especially considering the scale of the Arab attack , and Irene used the three years of the truce to strengthen her internal position : she seems to have dismissed most of the " old guard " of Constantine V 's generals , with the long @-@ serving and fanatically iconoclast Michael Lachanodrakon being the most prominent victim of this bloodless purge . In this way , Irene secured control over the military , and was able to refocus its efforts in expanding and consolidating Byzantine control over the Slavs of the Balkans .

Despite the truce , the chronicler Ibn Wadih mentions Arab raids into Asia Minor for the years 783 , 784 and 785 . If true , then these would probably represent only minor affairs , as the main sources agree that the truce was mutually respected until spring 785 . In that year , as Irene had strengthened her hold over the army and was preparing to confront the iconoclasts on the domestic front , she decided to cease payment of the tribute , and hostilities recommenced . In early 786 , the Byzantines scored a major success , sacking and razing to the ground the fortress town of Hadath in Cilicia , which the Abbasids had spent the last five years turning into a major stronghold and military base for their cross @-@ border expeditions . After the accession of Harun al @-@ Rashid to the caliphal throne in the same year , however , the Abbasids regained the initiative . Arab pressure mounted , and in 798 Irene was forced to ask for a peace treaty that repeated the stipulations of the 782 truce .