

= Sack of Amorium =

The Sack of Amorium by the Abbasid Caliphate in mid @-@ August 838 was one of the major events in the long history of the Arab ? Byzantine Wars . The Abbasid campaign was led personally by the Caliph al @-@ Mu 'tasim ( reigned 833 ? 842 ) , in retaliation to a virtually unopposed expedition launched by the Byzantine emperor Theophilos ( r . 829 ? 842 ) into the Caliphate 's borderlands the previous year . Mu 'tasim targeted Amorium , a Byzantine city in western Asia Minor ( modern Anatolia ) , because it was the birthplace of the ruling Byzantine dynasty and , at the time , one of Byzantium 's largest and most important cities . The caliph gathered an exceptionally large army , which he divided in two parts , which invaded from the northeast and the south . The northeastern army defeated the Byzantine forces under Theophilos at Anzen , allowing the Abbasids to penetrate deep into Byzantine @-@ held Asia Minor and converge upon Ancyra , which they found abandoned . After sacking the city , they turned south to Amorium , where they arrived on 1 August . Faced with intrigues at Constantinople and the rebellion of the large Khurramite contingent of his army , Theophilos was unable to aid the city .

Amorium was strongly fortified and garrisoned , but a traitor revealed a weak spot in the wall , where the Abbasids concentrated their attack , effecting a breach . Unable to break through the besieging army , Boiditzes , the commander of the breached section privately attempted to negotiate with the Caliph without notifying his superiors . He concluded a local truce and left his post , which allowed the Arabs to take advantage , enter the city and capture it . Amorium was systematically destroyed , never to recover its former prosperity . Many of its inhabitants were slaughtered , and the remainder driven off as slaves . Most of the survivors were released after a truce in 841 , but prominent officials were taken to the caliph 's capital of Samarra and executed years later after refusing to convert to Islam , becoming known as the 42 Martyrs of Amorium .

The conquest of Amorium was not only a major military disaster and a heavy personal blow for Theophilos , but also a traumatic event for the Byzantines , its impact resonating in later literature . The sack did not ultimately alter the balance of power , which was slowly shifting in Byzantium 's favour , but it thoroughly discredited the theological doctrine of Iconoclasm , ardently supported by Theophilos . As Iconoclasm relied heavily on military success for its legitimization , the fall of Amorium contributed decisively to its abandonment shortly after Theophilos 's death in 842 .

= = Background = =

By 829 , when the young emperor Theophilos ascended the Byzantine throne , the Byzantines and Arabs had been fighting on and off for almost two centuries . At this time , Arab attacks resumed both in the east , where after almost twenty years of peace due to the Abbasid civil war Caliph al @-@ Ma 'mun ( r . 813 ? 833 ) launched several large @-@ scale raids , and in the west , where the gradual Muslim conquest of Sicily was under way since 827 . Theophilos was an ambitious man and also a convinced adherent of Byzantine Iconoclasm , which prohibited the depiction of divine figures and the veneration of icons . He sought to bolster his regime and support his religious policies by military success against the Abbasid Caliphate , the Empire 's major antagonist .

Seeking divine favour , and responding to iconophile plots against him , Theophilos reinstated active suppression of the iconophiles and other perceived " heretics " in June 833 , including mass arrests and exiles , beatings and confiscations of property . In Byzantine eyes , God seemed indeed to reward this decision : al @-@ Ma 'mun died during the first stages of a new , large @-@ scale invasion against Byzantium that was intended to be the first step in conquering Constantinople itself , and his brother and successor al @-@ Mu 'tasim withdrew to focus on internal matters , having trouble establishing his authority , and needing to confront the ongoing rebellion of the Khurramite religious sect under Babak Khorramdin . This allowed Theophilos to achieve a series of modest victories over the next few years , as well as to bolster his forces with some 14 @,@ 000 Khurramite refugees under their leader Nasr , who was baptized a Christian and took the name Theophobos . The emperor 's successes were not particularly spectacular , but coming after two decades of defeats and civil war under iconophile emperors , Theophilos felt justified in claiming them as

vindication for his religious policy . Consequently , the emperor began to publicly associate himself with the memory of the militarily successful and fanatically iconoclast emperor Constantine V ( r . 741 ? 775 ) , and issued a new type of the copper follis coin , minted in huge numbers , which portrayed him as the archetypical victorious Roman emperor .

In 837 , Theophilos decided ? at the urging of the hard @-@ pressed Babak ? to take advantage of the Caliphate 's preoccupation with the suppression of the Khurramite revolt and lead a major campaign against the frontier emirates . He assembled a very large army , some 70 @,@ 000 fighting men and 100 @,@ 000 in total according to al @-@ Tabari , and invaded Arab territory around the upper Euphrates almost unopposed . The Byzantines took the towns of Sozopetra and Arsamosata , ravaged and plundered the countryside , extracted ransom from several cities in exchange for not attacking them , and defeated a number of smaller Arab forces . While Theophilos returned home to celebrate a triumph and be acclaimed in the Hippodrome of Constantinople as the " incomparable champion " , the refugees from Sozopetra began arriving at Mu 'tasim 's capital , Samarra . The caliphal court was outraged by the brutality and brazenness of the raids : not only had the Byzantines acted in open collusion with the Khurramite rebels , but during the sack of Sozopetra ? which some sources claim as Mu 'tasim 's own birthplace ? all male prisoners were executed and the rest sold into slavery , and some captive women were raped by Theophilos 's Khurramites . Theophilos 's campaign was unable , however , to save Babak and his followers , who in late 837 were forced from their mountain strongholds by the general Afshin . Babak fled to Armenia , but was betrayed to the Abbasids and died of torture .

With the Khurramite threat over , the caliph began marshalling his forces for a reprisal campaign against Byzantium . A huge Arab army gathered at Tarsus ; according to the most reliable account , that of Michael the Syrian , it numbered some 80 @,@ 000 men with 30 @,@ 000 servants and camp followers and 70 @,@ 000 pack animals . Other writers give far larger numbers , ranging from 200 @,@ 000 to 500 @,@ 000 according to al @-@ Mas 'udi . Unlike earlier campaigns , which did not go far beyond attacking the forts of the frontier zone , this expedition was intended to penetrate deep into Asia Minor and exact vengeance . The great city of Amorium in particular was the intended prize . The Arab chronicles record that Mu 'tasim asked his advisors to name the " most inaccessible and strongest " Byzantine fortress , and they named Amorium , " where no Muslim has gone since the appearance of Islam . It is the eye and foundation of Christendom ; among the Byzantines , it is more famous than Constantinople " . According to Byzantine sources , the caliph had the city 's name written on the shields and banners of his soldiers . The capital of the powerful Anatolic Theme , the city was strategically located at the western edge of the Anatolian plateau and controlled the main southern route followed by the Arab invasions . At the time , Amorium was one of the largest cities in the Byzantine Empire , ranking in importance immediately after Constantinople . It was also the birthplace of Theophilos 's father , Michael II the Amorian ( r . 820 ? 829 ) , and perhaps of Theophilos himself . Due to its strategic importance , the city had been a frequent target of Arab attacks in the 7th and 8th centuries , and Mu 'tasim 's predecessor Ma 'mun was said to be planning to attack the city when he died in 833 .

= = Opening stages of the campaign : Anzen and Ancyra = =

The caliph divided his force in two : a detachment of 10 @,@ 000 Turks under Afshin was sent northeast to join forces with the emir of Malatya Umar al @-@ Aqta and Armenian troops ( the Artsruni and Bagratuni rulers of Vaspurakan and Taron respectively both participated in person in the campaign ) and invade the Armeniac Theme from the Pass of Hadath , while the main army under the caliph himself would invade Cappadocia through the Cilician Gates . The advance guard of the latter was led by Ashinas , with Itakh commanding the right , Ja 'far ibn Dinar al @-@ Khayyat the left and ' Ujayf ibn ' Anbasa the centre . The two forces would link up at Ancyra , before marching jointly on Amorium . On the Byzantine side , Theophilos was soon made aware of the caliph 's intentions , and set out from Constantinople in early June . His army included men from the Anatolian and possibly also the European themes , the elite tagmata regiments , as well as the Khurramites . The Byzantines expected the Arab army to advance north to Ancyra after passing

through the Cilician Gates and then to turn south toward Amorium , but it was also possible that the Arabs would march directly over the Cappadocian plain to Amorium . Although his generals advised evacuation of the city , with the intention of rendering the Arabs ' campaign objective void and keeping the Byzantine army undivided , Theophilos decided to reinforce the city 's garrison , with Aetios the strategos of the Anatolics , and men from the tagmata of the Excubitors and the Vigla .

With the rest of his army , Theophilos then marched to interpose himself between the Cilician Gates and Ancyra , camping on the north bank of the river Halys , close to one of the major river crossings . Ashinas crossed the Cilician Gates on 19 June , and the caliph himself with his main army set out on the march two days later . The Arab advance was slow and cautious . Anxious to avoid an ambush and learn the emperor 's whereabouts , Mu 'tasim forbade Ashinas to advance too deeply into Cappadocia . Ashinas sent out many scouting detachments to take captives , and from them finally learned of Theophilos 's presence at the Halys , where he awaited the Arab approach to give battle . At the same time , around mid @-@ July , Theophilos learned of the arrival of Afshin 's army , comprising some 30 @,@ 000 men , at the plain of Dazimon . Leaving a part of his army under a relative to watch the crossings of the Halys , Theophilos immediately departed with most of his army , some 40 @,@ 000 men according to Michael the Syrian , to confront the smaller Arab force . Mu 'tasim learned of Theophilos 's departure from captives and tried to warn Afshin , but the emperor was faster and met Afshin 's army in the Battle of Anzen on the plain of Dazimon on 22 July . Despite initial success , the Byzantine army broke and scattered , while Theophilos with his guard were encircled and barely managed to break through and escape .

Theophilos quickly began regrouping his forces and sent the general Theodore Krateros to Ancyra . Krateros found the city completely deserted , and was ordered to reinforce the garrison of Amorium instead . Theophilos himself was soon forced to return to Constantinople , where rumours of his death at Anzen had led to plots to declare a new emperor . At the same time , the Khurramites , gathered around Sinope , revolted and declared their reluctant commander Theophobos emperor . Luckily for the Empire , Theophobos maintained a passive stance and made no move to confront Theophilos or join Mu 'tasim . The caliph 's vanguard under Ashinas reached Ancyra on 26 July . The inhabitants , who had sought refuge in some mines nearby , were discovered and taken captive after a brief struggle by an Arab detachment under Malik ibn Kaydar al @-@ Safadi . The Byzantines , some of whom were soldiers who had fled from Anzen , informed the Arabs of Afshin 's victory , after which Malik allowed all of them to go free . The other Arab forces arrived at Ancyra over the next days , and after plundering the deserted city , the united Arab army turned south towards Amorium .

= = Siege and fall of Amorium = =

The Arab army marched in three separate corps , with Ashinas once again in front , the caliph in the middle , and Afshin bringing up the rear . Looting the countryside as they advanced , they arrived before Amorium seven days after their departure from Ancyra , and began their siege of the city on 1 August . Theophilos , anxious to prevent the city 's fall , left Constantinople for Dorylaion , and from there sent an embassy to Mu 'tasim . His envoys , who arrived shortly before or during the first days of the siege , offered assurances that the atrocities at Sozopetra had been against the emperor 's orders , and further promised to help rebuild the city , to return all Muslim prisoners , and to pay a tribute . The caliph , however , not only refused to parley with the envoys , but detained them in his camp , so that they could observe the siege .

The city 's fortifications were strong , with a wide moat and a thick wall protected by 44 towers , according to the contemporary geographer Ibn Khordadbeh . The caliph assigned each of his generals to a stretch of the walls . Both besiegers and besieged had many siege engines , and for three days both sides exchanged missile fire while Arab sappers tried to undermine the walls . According to Arab accounts , an Arab prisoner who had converted to Christianity defected back to the caliph , and informed him about a place in the wall which had been badly damaged by heavy rainfall and only hastily and superficially repaired due to the city commander 's negligence . As a result , the Arabs concentrated their efforts on this section . The defenders tried to protect the wall

by hanging wooden beams to absorb the shock of the siege engines , but they splintered , and after two days a breach was made . Immediately Aetios realized that the defence was compromised , and decided to try and break through the besieging army during the night and link up with Theophilos . He sent two messengers to the emperor , but both were captured by the Arabs and brought before the caliph . Both agreed to convert to Islam , and Mu 'tasim , after giving them a rich reward , paraded them around the city walls in full view of Aetios and his troops . To prevent any sortie , the Arabs stepped up their vigilance , maintaining constant cavalry patrols even during the night .

The Arabs now launched repeated attacks on the breach , but the defenders held firm . At first , according to al @-@ Tabari , catapults manned by four men each were placed on wheeled platforms , and mobile towers with ten men each were constructed and advanced to the edge of the moat , which they began to fill with sheep skins ( from the animals they had brought along as food ) filled with earth . However , the work was uneven due to the soldiers ' fear of the Byzantine catapults , and Mu 'tasim had to order earth to be thrown over the skins to pave the surface up to the wall itself . A tower was pushed over the filled moat , but became stuck midway and it and the other siege engines had to be abandoned and burned . Another attack on the next day , led by Ashinas , failed due to the narrowness of the breach , and Mu 'tasim eventually ordered more catapults brought forward to widen it . The next day Afshin with his troops attacked the breach , and Itakh on the day after . The Byzantine defenders were gradually worn down by the constant assaults , and after about two weeks of siege ( the date is variously interpreted as 12 , 13 or 15 August by modern writers ) Aetios sent an embassy under the city 's bishop , offering to surrender Amorium in exchange for safe passage of the inhabitants and garrison , but Mu 'tasim refused . The Byzantine commander Boiditzes , however , who was in charge of the breach section , decided to conduct direct negotiations with the caliph on his own , probably intending to betray his own post . He went to the Abbasid camp , leaving orders for his men in the breach to stand down until his return . While Boiditzes parleyed with the caliph , the Arabs came closer to the breach , and at a signal charged and broke into the city . Taken by surprise , the Byzantines ' resistance was sporadic : some soldiers barricaded themselves in a monastery and were burned to death , while Aetios with his officers sought refuge in a tower before being forced to surrender .

The city was thoroughly sacked and plundered ; according to the Arab accounts , the sale of the spoils went on for five days . The Byzantine chronicler Theophanes Continuatus mentions 70 @,@ 000 dead , while the Arab al @-@ Mas 'udi records 30 @,@ 000 . The surviving population were divided as slaves among the army leaders , except for the city 's military and civic leaders , who were reserved for the caliph 's disposal . After allowing Theophilos 's envoys to return to him with the news of Amorium 's fall , Mu 'tasim burned the city to the ground , with only the city walls surviving relatively intact . Among the spoils taken were the massive iron doors of the city , which al @-@ Mu 'tasim initially transported to Samarra , where they were installed at the entrance of his palace . From there they were taken , probably towards the end of the century , and installed at al @-@ Raqqa , where they remained until 964 , when the Hamdanid ruler Sayf al @-@ Dawla had them removed and incorporated in the Bab al @-@ Qinnasrin gate in his capital Aleppo .

= = Aftermath = =

Immediately after the sack , rumours reached the caliph that Theophilos was advancing to attack him . Mu 'tasim set out with his army a day 's march along the road in the direction of Dorylaion , but encountered no sign of a Byzantine attack . According to al @-@ Tabari , Mu 'tasim now pondered extending his campaign to attack Constantinople , when news reached him of a conspiracy headed by his nephew , al @-@ Abbas ibn al @-@ Ma 'mun . Mu 'tasim was forced to cut short his campaign and return quickly to his realm , leaving intact the fortresses around Amorium as well as Theophilos and his army in Dorylaion . Taking the direct route from Amorium to the Cilician Gates , both the caliph 's army and its prisoners suffered in the march through the arid countryside of central Anatolia . Some captives were so exhausted that they could not move and were executed , whereupon others found the opportunity to escape . In retaliation , Mu 'tasim , after separating the most prominent among them , executed the rest , some 6 @,@ 000 in number .

Theophilos now sent a second embassy to the caliph , headed by the tourmarches of Charsianon , Basil , bearing gifts and an apologetic letter , and offering to ransom the high @-@ ranking prisoners for 20 @,@ 000 Byzantine pounds ( about 6 @,@ 500 kg ) of gold and to release all Arabs held captive by the Byzantines . In reply , Mu 'tasim refused the ransom , saying that the expedition alone had cost him over 100 @,@ 000 pounds , and demanded the surrender of Theophobos and the Domestic of the Schools , Manuel the Armenian , who had some years ago deserted from Arab service . The Byzantine ambassador refused to comply to this and indeed could not , as Theophobos was in revolt and Manuel had died , according to some accounts , from wounds received at Anzen . Instead , Basil handed over a second , much more threatening letter by Theophilos . Mu 'tasim , angered by this , returned the emperor 's gifts .

In the aftermath of the sack of Amorium , Theophilos sought the aid of other powers against the Abbasid threat : embassies were sent to both the western emperor Louis the Pious ( r . 813 ? 840 ) and to the court of Abd ar @-@ Rahman II ( r . 822 ? 852 ) , Emir of Córdoba . The Byzantine envoys were received with honours , but no help materialized . The Abbasids , however , did not follow up on their success . Warfare continued between the two empires with raids and counter @-@ raids for several years , but after a few Byzantine successes a truce and possibly also a prisoner exchange ? which excluded the high @-@ ranking captives from Amorium ? was agreed in 841 . At the time of his death in 842 , Mu 'tasim was preparing yet another large @-@ scale invasion , but the great fleet he had prepared to assault Constantinople perished in a storm off Cape Chelidonia a few months later . Following Mu 'tasim 's death , the Caliphate entered a prolonged period of unrest , and the Battle of Mauropotamos in 844 was the last major Arab ? Byzantine engagement until the 850s .

Among the captured Byzantine magnates of Amorium , the strategos Aetios was executed soon after his capture , perhaps , as the historian Warren Treadgold suggests , in retaliation to Theophilos 's second letter to the caliph . After years of captivity and no hope of ransom , the rest were urged to convert to Islam . When they refused , they were executed at Samarra on 6 March 845 , and are celebrated in the Eastern Orthodox Church as the 42 Martyrs of Amorium . Several tales also sprung up around Boiditzes and his betrayal . According to the legend of the 42 Martyrs , he converted to Islam , but was nevertheless executed by the caliph alongside the other captives ; unlike the others , however , whose bodies " miraculously " floated in the water of the river Tigris , his sank to the bottom .

= = Impact = =

The sack of Amorium was one of the most devastating events in the long history of Arab raids into Anatolia . Theophilos reportedly fell ill soon after the city 's fall , and although he recovered , his health remained in poor state until his death , three years later . Later Byzantine historians attribute his death before the age of thirty to his sorrow over the impact of the city 's loss , although this is most likely a legend . The fall of Amorium inspired several legends and stories among the Byzantines , and can be traced in surviving literary works such as the Song of Armouris or the ballad Kastro tis Orias ( " Castle of the Fair Maiden " ) . Arabs on the other hand celebrated the capture of Amorium , which became the subject of Abu Tammam 's famous Ode on the Conquest of Amorium . In addition , caliphal propaganda made use of the campaign to legitimize al @-@ Mu 'tasim 's rule and justify his subsequent murder of his nephew and the rightful heir to al @-@ Ma 'mun , al @-@ Abbas .

In reality , the campaign 's military impact on Byzantium was limited : outside the garrison and population of Amorium itself , the Byzantine field army at Anzen seems to have suffered few casualties , and the revolt of the Khurramite corps was suppressed without bloodshed the next year and its soldiers reintegrated into the Byzantine army . Ancyra was quickly rebuilt and reoccupied , as was Amorium itself , although it never recovered its former glory and the seat of the Anatolic theme was for a time transferred to Polybotus . According to the assessment of Warren Treadgold , the imperial army 's defeats at Anzen and Amorium were to a large degree the result of circumstance rather than actual incapability or inadequacy . In addition , the Byzantine campaign had suffered

from Theophilos 's overconfidence , both in his willingness to divide his forces in the face of greater Arab numbers and in his over @-@ reliance on the Khurramites . Nevertheless , the defeat prompted Theophilos to undertake a major reorganization of his army , which included the establishment of new frontier commands and the dispersing of the Khurramite troops among the native troops of the themes .

The most long @-@ term and long @-@ lasting result of the fall of Amorium , however , was in the religious rather than in the military sphere . Iconoclasm was supposed to bring divine favour and assure military victory , but neither the army 's weaknesses nor the reported treachery of Boiditzes could detract from the fact that this was " a humiliating disaster to match the worst defeats of any iconophile emperor " ( Whittow ) , comparable in recent memory only to the crushing defeat suffered by Nikephoros I ( r . 802 ? 811 ) at Pliska . As Warren Treadgold writes , " the outcome did not exactly prove that Iconoclasm was wrong ... but it did rob the iconoclasts for all time of their most persuasive argument to the undecided , that Iconoclasm won battles " . A little over a year after Theophilos 's death , on 11 March 843 , a synod restored the veneration of icons , and iconoclasm was declared heretical .