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## The Arabs through Skylitzes' Miniatures\*

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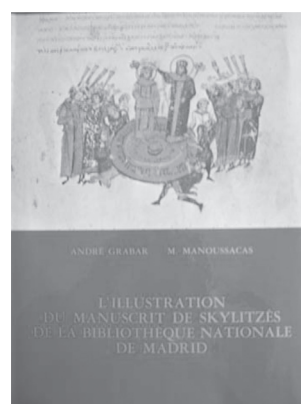
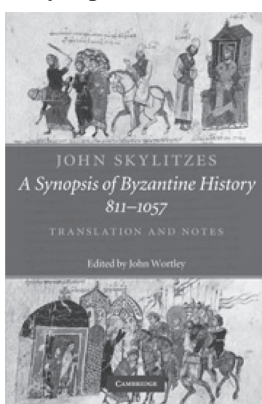
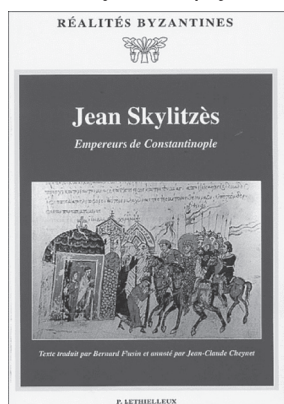
### *Presentation of the Chronicle*

#### **The Author**

About John Skylitzes we don't have much information. But we know that he is from the theme (the word theme means an administrative area where the power is at the hands of military patrikios) of the Thracians. He was born before 1050. His high education allowed him to occupy important position at the imperial court like many people such as Michael Psellos and Michael Attaleiates. He occupied the function of the governor of the Capital, *Eparch* of Constantinople.

He occupied also the function of chief of the main tribunal of Constantinople. He may be died at the beginning of the XII<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **The History: Σύνοψις Ἱστοριῶν / Synopsis Historion**



\* I have to thank the Mediterranean Studies Group of the Hitotsubashi University (Tokyo) for inviting me and allowing me to speak about Byzantines and Muslims in the middle ages, and to learn from the good questions they asked me. I have to thank all my colleagues and specially Dr. Erina Iwasaki who answered to all of my questions before, during and after my stay in Japan.

The chronicle of John Skylitzes entitled *Synopsis Historion* [Σύνοψις Ἱστοριῶν], *Abrégé historique*. It was written under the emperor Alexios Komnenos (1081-1118) and counted the history of each emperor from 811 to 1057 (23 emperors were concerned by this chronicle).

It was written as a continuation of the chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor. *The Synopsis historiae* is important because it summarize many lost texts as it was said in the prologue. Skylitzes told us that he was doubtful for many predecessors and he counts 16 historians, most of them or their chronicles are unknown for us.<sup>1</sup>

Many copies of the manuscript of *the Synopsis historiae* are known, but one of them is distinguished by its painting and which is known as the *Madrid Skylitzes*, *Codex Græcus Matritensis Ioannis Skylitzes* or *Skyllitzes Matritensis*. It is the only surviving illustrated manuscript of a Greek chronicle, and includes 574 images. It was produced in Sicily in the XII<sup>th</sup> century. It is providing an important primary source for the visualization of contemporary Byzantium, among them Arabs or Muslims. What do we learn about Muslims through the chronicle of Skylitzes? How the miniatures can inform us about the image the counterparts of Byzantines between the IX<sup>th</sup> and the XI<sup>th</sup> centuries?

The following four parts of Muslim world are concerned by this painting.

### ***I - The Andalusians and the Conquest of Crete***

At the beginning of the IX<sup>th</sup> century there was a revolt in Andalus against the Umayyad caliph al-Hakam called the revolt of the suburbs of Cordoba (thawrat *al-rabdh*). After the end of the revolts all of those who participate in it, was pushed out of al-Andalus. They practice piracy during about 12 years in the Mediterranean east, taking the harbour of Alexandria as point of anchorage.<sup>2</sup> Living in their ships and Arabic texts told us that they were in 40 ships.<sup>3</sup> They make many troubles in Alexandria and after many conflicts with the successive administrators of the City they were obliged in *rabi'I* 212h//June 827 to leave the harbour of Alexandria “after signing an agreement with local power allowing them to go where they want”.<sup>4</sup>

In this context they went to Crete Island, occupied it and create an independent state when Byzantium was ruled by Michael II (820-829). And that is the episode counted by John Skylitzes. How he described this occupation? But perhaps in this contribution we will not use the text but the pictures and evidently the text will help us to understand the sequence of the

1 Skylitzes, *Empereurs de Constantinople*, éd et traduction de B. Flusin et annotation de J-C. Cheynet, Paris, 2003, pp. VIII-IX.

2 Al-Kindi, *Woullat Misr (the governors of Egypt)*, éd. H. Nassar, Beyrouth, sans date, p.183. cf. V. Christides, *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs (ca.824)*, Athens, 1984. The author didn't use *the Synopsis historiae* which situates the Andalusians raids against Crete in 827 like the Arabic sources.

3 Ibidem, pp.188-189. Skylitzes, *Empereurs byzantins*, p. 41 cited the same number of ships

4 Ibidem, p.207

events.

How Skylitzes explains this conquest. He attributes this action to religious considerations. "Because the people is sinning; God, angry sent many signs and signals like massacres, fires, earthquakes, looting, and civilian fighting; wonders from the sky and from the air but people didn't understand. Then at the end, it was on the unfortunate islands that felled the horrible disasters".<sup>5</sup>

For these reasons the Arabs felled on Crete Island and conquest it. We find this traditional explanation every where in the Middle Ages and perhaps also today to explain many natural disasters.

And the author tells us how the Andalusians went and propose to their chief called Apochaps to mean Abu Hafis and called him *amiramounes* (which means the chief of Muslim community and in that time was only Abbassid caliph who is named as such in the Orient) to conquer new earth because their number is growing and the Andalusian was not able to contain them.<sup>6</sup> Skylitzes did not say anything about the origins of their presence in this area but just the beginning of the raids (Fig.1).

The representation of Abu Hafis who is at the left of the picture is similar to the representation of the emperor who is in his *Cathisma*. *Cathisma* is the specific place for the emperor when he is in Hippodrome or other public place. It is the symbol of power for all those who have a power.

But the difference is in the dress. On the head of the chief we can see the turban which is the symbol of power in medieval Muslim society.<sup>7</sup>

The text told us that the Andalusians went to meet their chief and ask him for sending or leading them to find a place for living and founding a state.

Abu Hafis received this suggestion with great joy. And directly he ordered to arm ships and attacked oriental Byzantine islands looking for the best among them to be colonized (prosperity, safety, and easy to control)<sup>8</sup> (Fig.2).

We can have an idea about the kind of ships; the form of the ship's hull and the use of the rowing but not sailing.

Abu Hafis who is at the third ship (in the left of the picture) may be distinguished with beard and his hair dress. His companions did not have a beard (Fig.3).

And here we have the meeting between the conquerors and local population, which was a violent meeting.

In the left the famous *Cathisma* occupied by an Andalusian who may be Abu Hafis himself when the local governor was taken to the ship of Muslims.

5 Skylitzes, *Empereurs byzantins*, p.40

6 Ibidem, p.40

7 See these texts in M. Tahar Mansouri, *Du Voile et du zunnar*, Tunis, 2007

8 Ibidem, p.41.

The text shows that the idea came from people not from the chief.

In 827 the Andalusians thrown out of Alexandria go the north through the Mediterranean east. And it seems that the conquest of Crete was the fruit of desperate rebels.

### **The Reconquest of Crete by Nikephoros Phokas**

There are many expeditions organized by Byzantine power to recover the island but they are not successful (the first was that of Krateros and the second was that of Ooryphas). But the island will not be recovered only under the rule of Nikephoros Phokas in March 961 after 134 years of Muslim rule (Fig.4).

The picture shows us just the island and the empty trireme and the imperial army in a fortified camp in a city. The Arabic texts told us that Nikephoros Phokas used cunning to take the island.

## *II - The Conquest of Sicily*

Between 831 and 878; the Aghlabids of Kairouan were engaged in a conquest war in Sicily. Skylitzes told about this episode and give many information about the Muslim conquest of Sicily and through his tale we find information about the siege of some cities, especially Syracuse and the miniaturist emphasize on this episode.

### **Attack of Syracuse**

We can see the characteristic of the Arabs: the white hair dress, the round shields, and the beards of soldiers (Fig.5).

The cities of Capua and Benevento sent an envoy to ask for help from Constantinople but their envoy was captured and he was leaded to the chief of Muslim army. We can distinguish the white hair dress and the way of covering head of Muslims through the case of their chief: the wide dress and the beard.

Behind the chief of the expedition we can see soldiers in arms with round shields and long arms as javelins. In front we can distinguish the Byzantines with multi coloured and triangular shields and short javelins.

We can also see the difference of the size of the two persons: the chief of the Muslim expedition is seating high and the Byzantine envoy feared and standing up.

The picture may express the difference between the two strengths in place and it seems that the Arabs have the upper position by the number and by the quality of arms.

Another picture showing an envoy from Sicily to ask Byzantine help captured by Muslims and leaded to the chief of the expedition. The miniaturist shows us the difference of size of the two persons (Fig.6).

In the colour of the dress and the hair dress and the beard we can also see the anger eyes

of the Muslim chief and the fear of the Byzantine captured man (Fig.7).

The fall of Syracuse announced by the demons to people of Epirus in the other side of Adriatic Sea (Fig.8).

Refugees from Sicily are telling about the fall of the city of Syracuse (Fig.9).

### ***III - The Fatimid of Maghrib***

After some victories against Byzantium the Bulgarian Tsar, Symeon (893-927) sent an embassy to Fatimid caliph al-Mahdi (911-934) encouraging him or asking from him to attack *Stein Polin* (Constantinople) and in the same time the Bulgarian attack Byzantium through the Thracian province. Skylitzes told that the project of Symeon was to lead a siege of the city by the two sides: earth and sea (this embassy may be between 922 and 927 under the rule of Romanos Lekapenos (922-944)).

The Bulgarian Tzar is charging a group of ambassadors to go to Madhya to meet who is called Phatlum which means the Fatimid caliph (Fig.10).

The arrival of Bulgarian ambassadors and their meeting of Fatimid caliph al-Mahdi (Fig.11).

The text told that when going home the Bulgarian ambassadors will be captured with Fatimid ambassadors going with them, but the Fatimid ambassadors will be captured by Byzantines who treat them kindly and the text said that the Emperor shows them how the Byzantines treat their enemies.

### ***IV - Oriental Muslims Have the Most and Intensive Relations with Byzantium.***

Many aspects of the oriental Muslims are presented in different pictures and dealing with many aspects of their image and how they were seen: they are seen and we can see a kind of human relations in peace and in war. The pictures made by a Sicilian miniaturist certainly Byzantine.

#### **Dexterity of a Muslim Prisoner**

After a triumphal expedition against the Arabs in 831 the chief of the Byzantine expedition presents a Muslim prisoner as a good mounted soldier (cavalier) playing in the Hippodrome with two javelins in the same time (Fig.12).

But at the end a Byzantine monk succeeds to earn and the Muslim mounted soldier falls down (Fig.13).

The image is that the Byzantines can well appreciate the good quality of someone though he is against them and though he "is barbarian" which is the case of the Muslim prisoner.

### **The Use of Money in War**

In Byzantine ideology all people who are not Byzantines they are considered as barbarians and the barbarians like nothing but gold and money (Fig.14).

This idea that strangers who attack Byzantium can be stopped with money is a central element of the Byzantine official ideology. The Arabs are like all the barbarian people: they can be stopped with gold money. Then they use money to purchase peace or like here some Byzantine fugitives use money to slow down Muslim soldiers who are running after them.

We can see three characteristics: the long javelins, the round shields and the blue colour of the hair dress. The painter makes the difference between the Maghribians who have white hair dresses and the oriental Muslims who use the blue one. But it seems that means the black colour of the Abbasids.

### **The Cunning:**

The two neighbours use cunning and as it is said the war is nothing but cunning.

The text told us that Arabs tried to take Edessa by using the ruse: at the left Arabs with charged camels were allowed to access to the city and they were invited to a feast (Fig.15).

In the same time others are out and waiting near the bags in which there are other Arabs, but the ruse was discovered by an Armenian the Arabs were killed and the attempt was fallen.

We can also distinguish the Byzantine governor of the city with his red hair dress and at the opposite the same way of covering heads, the colour is mixed white and blue the beards and the way of seating of the Arabs. We add camels which are used as another distinctive element for the Arabs.

There is also association between Arabs and those who are serving food; by the way of dress and the colour of it. Perhaps the painter wants to remember that Arabs who are called *saraceni* or *agaranoi* they are slaves of Sarah or the sons of the Agar her slave servant maid.

The following is the details of the precedent picture.

### **The War**

#### **Land Warfare**

Byzantine soldiers running after Arab ones (in the left we read *Ῥωμαῖοι* and in the right we read *τρέπονται Ἀγαρηνοί*) (Fig.16).

The distinction is in the hair dress which lets appearing something at in its extremity.

#### **Muslim Prisoners**

The picture shows Muslim prisoners linked to each others with their special dress and the appearance is the most difference between the two peoples.

Byzantine escaping they let their chief who will be killed alone in front of the Arab soldiers (Fig.17, 18).

### - Naval war

The use of Greek fire in naval war (Fig.19, 20).

### Diplomatic Exchanges

Byzantine ambassador named John (Synkellos, he is in the second position in Byzantine church after the patriarch) was sent by the emperor Theophilos just at the beginning of his rule, as ambassador to the Abbassid caliph al-Ma'mun (813-833).<sup>9</sup> Many subjects were concerned in this embassy (although it is not related in the text) with the negotiation of taking back of one of the Byzantine patrikios refugee in Baghdad named Manuel and he will be returned back some years after.

The difference between two sides can be observed in the chair, in the dress, and in the hair dress (Fig.21). Muslims receiving the Byzantine gift: we can see John Synkellos sitting on a chair and in front of him the Abbassid caliph is the first one to receive his gift. Many pages in Skylitzes text show that the emperor is higher than the Caliph (Fig.22). The picture corroborates the text.

### Conclusion

At the end we can say that the painting manuscript of Skylitzes gives us an idea about the representation of the neighbours of Byzantium and in this case the image of different Muslim parts of Islamic world: Sicily, Crete; the Fatimids and the Abbasids and Orient.

The miniaturist knows the differences between the great two parts of Islamic world and he is impregnated with the Byzantine ideology. He knows about Arabs and about their presence in the minds of Byzantines. He knows their way of life through their dress, their beards their way of seating. He allowed confirming some regional distinctions between the Maghrib and the Orient.

The pictures also give us an evolution of the image that Byzantines or the painter of the Skylitzes manuscript. The size of the picture of some people is reduced in the period of the strength of Byzantine power. The text of Skylitzes followed the evolution of the Byzantine empire from the beginning of the IX<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the XI<sup>th</sup> century with an important period of Byzantine history called by many historians as *the golden age of Byzantium* from the end of the IX<sup>th</sup> century to the early XI<sup>th</sup> century during the Macedonian dynasty and specially from Basil to Basil which means from the rule of Basil the First to the

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9 The Byzantine ambassador led by John Synkellos the grammarian, just after the access of Theophilos to the power, perhaps in 829. Syria was under the Abbassid caliph al-Ma'mun (813-833), the son of Harun al-Rashid. The ambassador showed the wealth and the strength of the empire so to dissuade him to attack Byzantine empire. But the text does not speak about another purpose of this ambassador which is the negociation with Manuel former military strategos who was refugee at Baghdad, cf J. Skylitzes, *Empereurs byzantins*, p.53, note 24.

end of the rule of Basil the Second between 867 and 1025.

In every case: the miniatures expressed the image that the text has transmitted about the relations of Byzantium with its neighbours: this image is standardized with the kind of dress, the covering heads, the beards and the different colours of this dress between the two parts of Muslim world.





Fig.1 Andalusians asking their emir to allow them to stay in the island of Crete; Skylitzes, édition de Venise, 1979, n°28 (fol. 38b).



Fig.2 The Andalusians going to Crete, Ibidem. Fol. 38v.



Fig.3 The Andalusians disembarked at Crete, Ibidem. Fol. 39.



Fig.4 The Byzantine fleet in 963 on Crete Island, Ibidem; op. cit, fol. 140.



Fig.5 The assault of Syracuse by Muslims, Ibidem. Fol. 100v.



Fig.6 The chief of Muslim army besieging the City of Capua discussing with captured ambassador sent by the inhabitants of the besieged city to Constantinople, Ibidem. Fol. 97v.

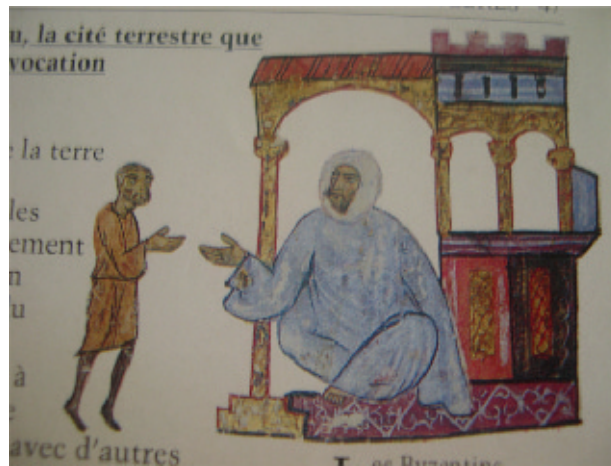


Fig.7 Byzantine ambassador with the chief of Muslim army, in M. Kaplan, *Tout l'Or de Byzance*, Paris, 1991, p. 47.



Fig.8 Demons telling people in Peloponnese about the fall of Syracuse, Ibidem. Fol. 101a.



Fig.9 Refugees telling people in Peloponnese about the fall of Syracuse, Ibidem. Fol. 101b.



Fig.10 The Byzantine emperor captured Bulgarian ambassadors with Fatimid ones. He allowed the Muslims to go to Mahdiya and the Bulgarian were put in prison (the right of the image) Ibidem. Fol. 148v, a.



Fig.11 The Fatimid caliph of Mahdiya received the gifts of Bulgarian Tzar, Ibidem. Fol. 148v, b.



Fig.12 The achievement of an Arab horseman in Constantinople Racecourse, Ibidem. Fol. 55a.





Fig. 13 The same horseman defeated by Theodoros Krateros falls from his horse. Ibidem. Fol. 55v.



Fig. 14 Byzantine fugitives threw gold coins to slow their Arab pursuers; Ibidem. Fol. 113v, b.



Fig.15 Attempted taking of Edessa by the Arabs by the cunning. Ibidem. Fol. 212v, a.



Fig.16 Cavalries: Arabs fleeing from the Byzantines; Ibidem. Fol. 54v.





Fig.17 Byzantine soldiers going in the city of Tarento (South Italy) with a group of Muslim prisoners. Ibidem. Fol. 99v, b.



Fig.18 A battle opposing Arabs and Byzatines. Ibidem. Fol. 99v, a.



Fig.19 Naval battle between Byzantines and Russians, Ibidem. Fol. 130.



Fig.20 The use of Greek fire in naval war; Ibidem. Fol. 34v, b.



Fig.21 The caliph al-Ma'mun receiving John Synkellos, the grammarian, the ambassador of Byzantine emperor Theophilos, Ibidem. Fol. 47.



Fig.22 Muslims receiving the Byzantine gifts distributed by the Byzantine ambassador, John the grammarian, Ibidem. Fol. 47v, a.