Christian Byzantium and the Muslim Abbasid caliphate were bitter rivals. Yet the necessities of trade and a mutual admiration of ancient Greece meant that there was far more to their relationship than war, as Jonathan Harris explains.

Best of Enemies

Osama bin Laden once declared that the world was divided into those who were with Islam and those who were with the ‘crusade’, the western imperialist oppression of Muslims. The stark division between them and us is what one would expect of a militant jihadist, yet bin Laden’s polarised language finds a curious reflection in the plethora of English-language books, films and television programmes that continue to be produced about the medieval crusades. With their retelling of the dramatic story of the struggle to control Jerusalem and the Holy Land between 1095 and 1291 comes an assumption, sometimes implicit, sometimes openly stated, that this confrontation between implacable and ideologically divided enemies was permanent and irreconcilable, even to the extent that it continues in the tension between Islam and the West today.

John the Grammarian, ambassador to the Abbasid Caliph Ma’mun in 829, reports back to Byzantine Emperor Theophilus. 12th-century manuscript by John Skylitzes.

This assumption is a misleading one. Endless war is a phenomenon that is never found in human history. However bitter a conflict, if neither side can achieve a complete and swift victory (which they seldom do), sooner or later they will have to find some kind of accommodation, if only to mitigate the dire effects of conflict on everyday life. Medieval Christians and Muslims had to find some way of living alongside each other, just as they do today. In the process they occasionally discovered things to admire as well as to despise in the faith and culture of their hereditary enemies. This point comes across very forcibly when we examine the interaction between the Christian Byzantine Empire, also known as Byzantium, and the Muslim Abbasid caliphate between about 750 and 1050 AD.

There is no denying that these two societies were almost constantly at war with one another. During
the century after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632 AD the newly Islamised Arabs had conquered a huge swath of territory, much of it at the expense of Byzantium. They had robbed the empire of its eastern provinces of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, including the holy city of Jerusalem, and had even come close to capturing its capital city, Constantinople. By 750, when the Abbasid dynasty took control of the Muslim world, the frontier between Byzantium and the caliphate, and hence between Christianity and Islam, had been stabilised in eastern Asia Minor and northern Syria. Both sides seem to have given up on the idea of trying to eradicate each other completely but warfare along the frontier was constant and the clashes occasionally reached levels of savagery rivalling the worst excesses of the crusades. During the eighth and ninth centuries the initiative largely lay with the Muslims, who crossed the frontier on raids almost every year.

In 838 Caliph Al-Mut'asim (r.833-842) led his army deep into Byzantine territory where it captured and sacked the main town of the Anatolian province, Amorion. Thousands of Christian prisoners were then marched 40 miles along a waterless road in the scorching August sun. Around 6,000 of them died on the way. After about 900, however, the pendulum swung the other way, as the Abbasid caliphate started to lose control of its vast territory and the Byzantines were able to take advantage of its weakness. In 962 the Byzantine general and future emperor Nikephoros Phokas descended on Syria and, it was said, destroyed everything in his path with fire and sword, ravaging the fields and taking captive the populations of Aleppo and other towns. In 975 Phokas’ successor, John Tziniskes (r.969-976), pushed even further south, extorting large sums of money from Muslim towns on his route. He came close to capturing Jerusalem, more than a hundred years before the First Crusade.

**Conflicts of the Righteous**

Both the Byzantines and the Arabs justified these brutal pillaging expeditions as righteous wars against infidels. In Muslim accounts successful attacks were always accompanied by the formula ‘God gave the victory’, while John Tziniskes declared that because of his raid into Syria ‘the holy cross of Christ has been expanded’. The religious rivalry extended beyond the field of battle, for Byzantine and Arab intellectuals were fond of penning violent denunciations of each other’s beliefs. What is striking about these polemics is not so much their hostility as the ignorance that they display. For example, the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII (r.945-959) was under the mistaken impression that Muslims worshipped the planet Venus:

*And they pray, moreover, to the star of Aphrodite, which they call Koubar, and in their supplication cry out ‘Alla wa Koubar’, this is ‘God and Aphrodite’. For they call God ‘Alla’ and ‘wa’ they use for the*
conjunction 'and' and they call the star 'Koubar' and so they say 'Alla wa Koubar'.

The learned emperor had clearly misunderstood the Arabic phrase 'Allah akbar' (God is great). His fellow Byzantine, Niketas Byzantinios (fl. 842-867), denounced the Muslims for believing that God had created man from a leech. He had been deceived by his Greek version of the Qur'an which mistranslated 'clots of blood' in Sura 96.2. Muslims were no better informed about Christianity. Abu Uthman Al-ibniz (781-868/9) of Basra thought that the Byzantines had three gods, an obvious and perhaps calculated misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

Dealing with division

In spite of the violence and the harsh words, however, both sides had an interest in mitigating the confrontation, as is the case with most deeply divided adversaries. One of the most basic common interests was the redemption of prisoners, such as the unfortunate dragged off from Amurioin and Aleppo. The taking of prisoners is as old as human conflict and every set of combatants has sought to establish some kind of procedure that both sides trust to make the exchange. It often involves a bridge, so that the two sides can meet and have a physical link and yet be kept separate by, for example, a river. During the Cold War the Russians and Americans used the Glienicker Bridge over the Havel River on the outskirts of Berlin. The Byzantines and Abbasids had their equivalent on the River Lamis near Tarsus on the frontline between them. On the appointed day both sides would simultaneously send one prisoner across so that they would pass in the middle of the bridge. That way it could be ensured that the exchange was like for like and neither side could get away with exchanging an old man for one of military age. Alternatively, if one side had more prisoners than the other, a ransom could be paid. On September 21st, 896, for example, over 2,000 Muslim men, women and children were ransomed from the Byzantines at the Lamis bridge.

Prisoner exchanges were a distasteful necessity arising from conflict but there was a whole sphere of peaceful interaction going on in parallel with the wars, for the two societies were almost continuously trading with each other. Again this is not a unique phenomenon. Trade between Britain and France continued in spite of the Napoleonic Wars to the extent that the French army which invaded Russia in 1812 was largely wearing British boots and the emperor himself shaved with razors made in Birmingham. The Abbasid capital of Baghdad and the great cities of Damascus and Constantinople were all staging posts on an international trading route that stretched from China and which was primarily used to transport westwards the products of the east, notably spices, silk, porcelain and glass, regardless of ideological or political borders. Some of these goods were lost in transit but have been preserved and rediscovered by archaeologists. During the 1030s a small merchant vessel was making its way up the Aegean and, when night fell and the wind got up, its crew dropped anchor close inshore. Unfortunately, in the ensuing
gale, the shank of the anchor broke and the ship founded at Serçe Limanı on the rocky Asia Minor coast. Excavated in the 1970s, the wreck and its cargo are now in the Institute of Nautical Archaeology in Bodrum, Turkey. The ship had been carrying Arab glassware, probably from Syria, to be sold in the markets of Constantinople.

**Free trade**

Rulers, whether Muslim or Christian, encouraged the free flow of goods because they could levy taxes on the trade. This was particularly true of the Byzantine emperor, Constantinople, at the end of the trade route, was an entrepôt where goods from all over the world arrived and could be sold on. Merchants from Italy and Russia were particularly eager to buy up spices and silks, which could be sold for astronomical prices back home. Arab merchants in turn wanted to acquire the tin, furs, timber and amber brought by Italians and Russians. The emperor charged a ten per cent customs duty on all goods that the merchants brought in to Constantinople and everything they took out, as well as miscellaneous tolls and harbour dues. With so much at stake financially, it was in the emperor’s interest to ensure that merchants were made as welcome as possible. Churches where the services were held in Latin rather than Greek were provided for the Italians and a place of worship was made available for visiting Muslim merchants. The Mićatun mosque was discreetly sited just outside the sea walls of the city, near the commercial area known as the Golden Horn.

Prisoner exchanges were prompted by necessity, trade by the hope of financial gain. Although both activities temper the picture of relentless hostility, they hardly modify it. Even so, these very limited forms of interaction between the two societies did enable their governing elites to learn about each other and even find things to admire. As a consequence of the prisoner exchanges and the commercial links, the Byzantines and the Arabs were in constant diplomatic contact with a stream of ambassadors plying between Baghdad and Constantinople. They engaged in hard-nosed bargaining and in many ways Byzantine-Abbasid rivalry was as acute in diplomacy as it was on the field of battle.

In 829, for example, the Byzantine courtier John the Grammatair was sent on an embassy to the court of Caliph al-Ma’mun (r.813-833) in Baghdad. The ostensible aim of his visit was to announce to the caliph the accession of a new Byzantine emperor Theophilos (r.829-842) and to arrange an exchange of prisoners. There was, however, another element to the mission. Theophilos wanted to impress on the Arabs just how wealthy and powerful he was. John was entrusted with several large chests of gold coins and once he arrived he scattered the coins ‘as if they were sand’ as gifts to the caliph, his ministers and his court functionaries. He even went through an elaborate pantomime at a banquet that he hosted at his residence one evening to reinforce the lesson that the emperor’s coffers were inexhaustible. The Arab guests were served wine from a beautiful silver vessel but halfway through the proceedings, John ordered his servants to hide it. The guests were horrified by the loss of this costly item and offered to send out search parties to recover it. Their host merely shrugged his shoulders and bade his servants to bring in another, as exquisite and costly as the last. Eager to reciprocate, the caliph released a hundred Byzantine prisoners, but John refused to accept them. He would only do so, he said, when an appropriate ransom had been paid. The point was made, if rather laboured. The tactic was no doubt designed to discourage Abbasid attacks on the Byzantine borders, although it did not work: it was during Theophilos’ reign that the Arabs scored their great success in capturing Amorion.
On the other hand, missions like John the Grammarian’s enabled ambassadors to take stock of their surrounding while they were at the enemy court. At the very moment when he was supposed to be impressing on the Arabs the wealth and power of Byzantium, John the Grammarian found himself secretly amazed at the wonders of Baghdad, a city with a population of hundreds of thousands and the centre of the Islamic golden age. He was particularly struck by the caliph’s palace, a seemingly endless complex of shady courtyards and lush gardens. No sooner was he back in Constantinople than he persuaded the emperor to build himself a country residence to exactly the same design, with the one difference that two churches were included.

Most ambassadors were too preoccupied with the details of their missions to spend much time sightseeing. Ibn Shahram, who was in Constantinople in 981–982, left a detailed account of the tense negotiations about the overlordship of Aleppo and possession of frontier fortresses. At one point he was told by Emperor Basil II (r.976–1025) that he must go on a ‘reprehensible errand’ and that he should accept earlier treaties or leave. Other Arab visitors did find time to admire

Constantinople. Early in the tenth century Harun ir-Rashid came to the Byzantine capital not as an ambassador but as a prisoner. Captured with many others on the frontier, he was brought back to Constantinople, no doubt to await ransom or exchange. He seems to have been treated well enough and he was certainly not locked up because he left a detailed account of what he saw during his stay. He was clearly very impressed and there is no evidence of any hostility on his part towards the Byzantines because of their religion. He described the city walls, the Hippodrome where public events were staged, the imperial palace and the statues that lined the streets. One thing that particularly struck Harun was a procession that he witnessed. The Byzantines were masters of laying on a good show. On the major religious festivals it was customary for the emperor to process from his palace across Constantinople’s central square, the Augusteion, to the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia. It was one of these occasions that Harun witnessed. What struck him was the sheer number of people taking part and the opulence and colours of the robes that they wore.

By contrast a Christian Italian who witnessed a similar event a few years later sneered that the costumes worn by the participants were old and cheap.

It seems quite clear that although the Byzantines and Arabs were constantly at war and regarded each other’s religions as mistaken follies, there were
An Islamic decorated glass bowl intended for the Byzantine market, part of the cargo from the ship wrecked at Serçe Limani, which set sail from Syria c.1025.

peaceful diplomatic and commercial links between them and these in turn could give them a glimpse of positive aspects of the enemy camp. Even during the period of the crusades, the height of Muslim-Christian confrontation, the Latin states of Syria and Palestine traded and negotiated with their Muslim neighbours and there is evidence of artistic imitation and cultural cross-fertilisation. In the case of the Byzantines and Abbasids, however, there was another element in the equation, one completely lacking in the interaction between crusaders and Muslims. At least from the point of view of Baghdad and Constantinople were concerned, there was something that they had in common. Although their languages and their religions were different, they shared an admiration for the literature and ideas of ancient Greece.

**In love with ancient Greece**

It is not surprising that Byzantine intellectuals should look to the Greeks for inspiration. After all, Greek was the language of the empire and Athens and the other areas where Hellenic culture had originally developed were within the empire’s borders. When Constantinople rose to be the capital of the Byzantine Empire, it also became an educational and intellectual centre, where ancient Greek literature from Homer (c.750 BC) to Lucian (c.150 AD) was studied. These texts formed the basis of Byzantine higher education and knowledge of them and the ability to write in the same idiom was a prerequisite for entry into the lucrative posts of the civil service. The demand thus created for the classic texts ensured that Constantinople was a centre of book production, with scribes laboriously copying out Thucydides, Aristophanes or Euripides for wealthy patrons. Since these authors had all been pagans, some were more valued than others. Showing too great an admiration for the ideas of Plato or the Neoplatonists, whose ideas are difficult to reconcile with Christianity, could lead to a searching interview with the Church authorities and even disgrace and imprisonment. On the other hand, Galen and Dioscorides formed the basis of Byzantine medical practice. The scientific and philosophical texts apart, the Byzantines admired the classics chiefly for their style and not so much for their content and their archaic language was a kind of code that educated courtiers shared to the exclusion of others.

The Arabs, too, had their share of this classical legacy. When they had overrun the Byzantine eastern provinces during the seventh century they came into possession of several centres of Greek culture, notably Alexandria, and with them repositories of books dating back centuries. They exploited this resource in a rather different way from the Byzantines. Their main interest was in the philosophy, mathematics and medicine that those books contained rather than their linguistic and literary qualities. The caliphs, especially Harun al-Raschid (r.786-809), encouraged their translation into Arabic so that they could be studied more easily by Muslim scholars. Harun’s son, al-Ma’mun, took a personal interest in ancient Greek science and in geometry in particular. In some fields Islamic scholars made considerable advances on the ancient Greeks, notably in mathematics, where they developed the numerals that have now become universal.

Even if the Byzantines and the Arabs used the classical legacy in very different ways, the knowledge that they shared made a difference to the way
that their ruling elites interacted. On one level it provided a useful diplomatic tool. The Byzantines soon became aware that they were commonly viewed among Muslim intellectuals as the guardians of ancient Greek knowledge. al-Jahiz, cited earlier for his assertion that the Byzantines believed in three gods, could also say that they were ‘a people of religious philosophers, physicians, astronomers, diplomats, mathematicians, secretaries and masters of every discipline’. Emperors and their advisors exploited this perception by sending finely bound copies of Galen or Dioscorides to Muslim rulers as gifts. There was a limit, though, to just how much of their classical inheritance the Byzantines were prepared to hand over. Caliph al-Mamun allegedly offered Emperor Theophilos 2,000 lbs of gold and eternal peace, if he would only allow one of his best professors of geometry, Leo the Mathematician, to reside for a short time in Baghdad. Interestingly the emperor turned down the offer because he thought it would be ‘inappropriate to hand out to the Gentiles that knowledge of the nature of things which distinguished the Roman [Byzantine] race’.

Brotherhood
Not everyone shared Theophilos’ views on Byzantium’s unique distinction. There were those who believed that both Byzantium and the Abbasid caliphate, although divided by religion, were distinguished through their knowledge and wisdom from other peoples. Striking in this respect is a letter written by Nicholas Mystikos, Patriarch of Constantinople (901-907 and 912-925), probably to an Abbasid caliph. In it the patriarch described their two societies as the lordships ‘which stand above all lordship upon earth’. They had both received this authority from God and were therefore ‘brothers superior to and preferred above their brethren’. For this very reason, the patriarch urged, Byzantines and Arabs ought to be brotherly and in contact with each other. The letter is unusual and by no means typical of approaches made by Byzantine clergymen to Muslim potentates. Its context needs to be considered as well. Nicholas was writing in the hope that the caliph would release some Christian prisoners, so it is hardly surprising that he was flattering. Nevertheless it is a cogent statement of the belief that the Byzantines and Arabs, even though they were often bitter enemies, were somehow superior to the barbarian world around them.

Thus the relationship between these two powers might appear to have been hopelessly contradictory. On the one hand they denounced each other as infidels and fought bitterly on their frontiers; on the other their ruling elites happily believed that God had entrusted them both with special wisdom and authority. There is, however, no contradiction. Complete ideological alienation and total war are the exception not the rule in human history. They are rare and relatively short lived because it is not within the power or interest of the participants to sustain them. Sooner or later, if exhaustion does not bring an end to a conflict, it will at least be modified by necessity, hope of gain or even a grudging admiration for the hated foe.

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Further Reading
Nadia Maria El Cheikh, Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs (Harvard University Press, 2004).
Jonathan Harris, Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium (Continuum, 2007).

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