TRAFFIC ACROSS THE CILICIAN FRONTIER IN THE NINTH AND TENTH CENTURIES: MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE BETWEEN BYZANTIUM AND THE ISLAMIC NEAR EAST IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Koray Durak
Boğaziçi University, Department of History, Istanbul, Turkey

There were many reasons for Near Easterners to be in Byzantium. Some were taken there against their wishes; some went there willingly to trade, to negotiate, or to die. Some entered the Christian Empire only once, while others paid frequent visits; some had a very fleeting glimpse of Byzantium while others settled there. Conversely, Byzantines went to the Near East for many of the same reasons, and they travelled under similar conditions. The purpose of this paper is to show how varied the movement of people between Byzantium and the Islamic Near East was, using the Cilician frontier in the ninth and tenth centuries as an example. Exchanges of people who moved for a variety of reasons across the Cilician frontier have not been examined in the modern scholarship, and those modern works that focus on Islamic Cilicia or the Byzantine-Islamic frontier in Cilicia tend to emphasize the military aspect of the encounter\(^1\). More specifically, I ask whether the routes between Byzantium and the Near East that were used, in the words of the late-tenth-century Muslim geographer al-Mu'akkaddasi, *to ransom prisoners, send dispatches, invade, or conduct trade* were separate from each other, or whether people travelling with different motives, such as soldiers, captives, diplomats, exiles, merchants, and pilgrims, shared the same routes\(^2\).

The Syrian-facing Cilician frontier was one of the major passages between the Byzantine and Islamic worlds in the ninth and tenth centuries, in addition to Trebizond and the Armenian routes in the east, and the Mediterranean Sea routes connecting Cyprus and Crete to Greece and Anatolia in the south. The Cilician fron-

---

\(^1\) I would like to thank the committee of TÜBA-GEBİP (The Turkish Academy of Sciences, The Young Scientists Award Programme) for its support.

\(^2\) Al-Mu'akkaddasi 147.
tier was formed when the Umayyads consolidated their control of the Cilician plain gradually in the later seventh and early eighth centuries, and it remained stable until the mid-tenth century. The border passed roughly through the Taurus/Anti-Taurus mountain ranges, starting from the west of Tarsos, passing through Muslim-held Germanikeia and Melitene in the east. The transition of power in the Islamic world from the Umayyads to the Abbasids in 750 did not bring about drastic changes to the Syrian frontier, but the frontier districts facing Byzantium were reorganized, starting under Hārūn al-Rashīd, into two defensive zones. The outermost zone (thughūr) was characterized by the presence of fortresses that bore the brunt of the Byzantine attacks, while the second, interior zone (ʿawāsim) contained fortresses and fortified cities, which acted as elements supporting the thughūr. In the case of the Syrian frontier facing Byzantine Anatolia, the thughūr extended from Tarsos to Germanikeia in Cilicia, while the ʿawāsim formed a line in northern Syria from Antioch to Manbij. Concerning the Byzantine defences, the themata (themes) of Anatolikon and Armeniakon stood the land incursions of the Arabs while the theme of the Kibyrrhaiotai faced Arab attacks from the sea for the seventh and early eighth centuries. The Kleisura of Cappadocia, which was a theme by 863, and the Kleisura of Seleukeia (modern Silifke), which Romanos Lekapenos promoted to theme status c. 930, faced the Syrian thughūr by the tenth century, together with the theme of Anatolikon.3

Throughout the ninth and early tenth centuries, Cilicia and Syria remained largely under the control the Abbasids, although the Syrian thughūr entered Tulunid control between 878 and 896. In the mid- and later-tenth century, the Hamdanid Amir Sayf al-Dawla took control of Mosul and Aleppo, extended the military confrontation with Byzantium throughout the whole frontier region, and added Cilicia to his domains.4 However, this formidable foe of the Byzantines was obliged to resign against the expanding forces of the Byzantines, and his state was made into a tributary principality by 969. The efforts of Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros Phokas in the 960s not only resulted in the capture of Cilicia but also in retaking control of northern Syria for the Byzantines after approximately three centuries of Abbasid rule.5


5. CANARD (1966) 720-722; HILD and HELLENKEMPER (1990) 59-62. FARAG (1990) 44-47; Ho-
In the ninth and tenth centuries, political powers on both sides of the frontier created a highly militarized frontier through the erection of a network of fortifications and regular raids to weaken the enemy. However, complete control of the frontier by the central political authorities was an ideological construct rather than a reality. As Florin Curta shows, the shift in modern scholarship from the concept of “frontier-as-barrier” towards that of “frontier as a permeable zone” allows us to see continuities and connections rather than impermeable boundaries. Exchanges of people, objects, and information, the networks necessary for these exchanges, and the negative or positive impact of state control over these exchanges have become the new foci of frontier studies in history.

In a militarized zone that lay on the shortest route connecting the political centres of Byzantium and the Abbasid and post-Abbasid Near East, it is no surprise to find various cases of military, political, and diplomatic movement, which would have served to organize the relations between the political entities. The Syrian thughur and the central/eastern Anatolian plateau facing it were unquestionably the battlefields of Byzantine-Islamic military encounters. The Taurus/Anti-Taurus line, with its mountain passes, stood on the routes used both in seasonal raids and in large expeditions by caliphs. As Ahrweiler’s study on the routes of Arab raids from the seventh to the ninth centuries painstakingly shows, the overland routes that were most frequently visited by Arab raiders coming from the Syrian thughur were: A. the easternmost Germanikeia-Caesarea route or Northern Syria-Caesarea route that passed through the al-Hadath/Adata defile (hereafter called the Adata Route); B. the route that connected Tarsos to Cappadocia via the Cilician Gates (hereafter called the Route of the Cilician Gates); C. the route that started from Seleukeia and followed a northern diagonal line that cut across the Taurus Mountains through Isaura and Claudiopolis (modern Mut), reaching the Anatolian plateau in Laranda (hereafter called the Diagonal Route); D. the Mediterranean Coastal Route that connected Cilica to Seleukeia and Attaleia (modern

8. Two large military campaigns passing through the Syrian thughur occurred during the early ninth century. The route of Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun's forces in his grand campaign against Theophilos in 830-831 was as follows: Baghdad-Mosul-Manbij in northern Syria-Antioch-Tarsos-Koron in Cappadocia. The Abbasid army clearly passed through the Cilician Gates. Al-Ţabarī III/2 1103-1104. In the famous campaign of Caliph al-Mu'tasim against Amorion in 838, forces under the Caliph and the general Ašhnaš entered the Anatolian plateau through the Cilician Gates. Al-Ţabarī III/2 1237.
Antalya). These land routes and passes were used in the tenth century too, both by the Byzantine and the Islamic armies. The *De Velitatione* (Treatise on Skirmishing), traditionally attributed to Emperor Nikephoros Phokas, reflects the conditions of the eastern frontier in the early tenth century. This text counts the passes in the themes of Seleukeia and Anatolikon, and in the area around Germanikeia and Adada, as routes which the Arab forces used to retreat to their own territory; the Byzantine forces must also have used these routes to pursue the enemy. The construction of a fire beacon system from Loulon, north of the Cilician Gates, to Constantinople as an early warning system for Arab attacks shows how frequently the Route of the Cilician Gates was used for military purposes. Byzantine emperors in their campaigns used these Cilician routes in order to descend from the Anatolian plateau to Cilicia. For instance, Basil I in his Syrian campaign of 878 used the Cappadocia-Germanikeia route to transfer his army.

A major type of exchange that resulted from military confrontation between the Byzantines and the Muslims was the carrying of captives by the enemy forces. Innumerous references to the seizure of soldiers in battles and civilians in raids in the written sources of the period demonstrate that involuntary movement of people across the frontier was a very common occurrence. While some of the captives were sold into markets as slaves, others were kept as prisoners for exchange. We have evidence for the occurrence of both cases in the Cilician region. The Abbasid geographer ibn Khurraḍādbhīb, referring to the raids into the Byzantine territories in Cilicia in his *Kitāb al-masālik wa'l-mamālik* from the later ninth century, mentions female slaves being carried on the back of she-camels descending from the mountains.

---

13. ROTMAN (2005) 777. For the most recent discussion on Byzantium’s role in international trade of slaves, see ROTMAN (2009) 57-81.
to Tarsos\textsuperscript{14}. The Persian geographer ibn al-Fa\c{k}ih, too, writing in the early tenth century when Cilicia was still under Islamic rule, claims that slaves and eunuchs were brought from Byzantium. However, by the later tenth century, when the Byzantine armies controlled northern Syria, the situation must have changed, because al-Mu\c{k}addas\textsuperscript{i} laments in the later tenth century that the slaves were no more brought from Byzantium to Syria because of the wars\textsuperscript{15}. In addition to being an important venue for the transportation of slaves, Cilicia was a major nexus for the movement of prisoners as well. Tarsos, Aleppo, and Baghdad were major Islamic cities where Byzantine prisoners were kept, while Ikonion and Constantinople were major Byzantine locations where Islamic captives were imprisoned in the tenth century\textsuperscript{16}. When one looks at the geographical distribution of the cities listed above, one can easily see that Cilicia stood in the middle of the prisoner routes, connecting to Baghdad via Aleppo, and to Constantinople via Ikonion. There are occasional references in the sources to the use of Cilician routes to transport captives. The amir of Tarsos, abu Th\=abit, who fell prey to the Byzantines in a raid in 900, was carried from the Taurus border to Const-

\textsuperscript{14} Ibn Khurrad\=adhbih 99-100.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibn al-Fa\c{k}ih 148; Al-Mukaddas\textsuperscript{i} 242. Michael Bonner states that plunder, and especially slaves, contributed to the local economy in Cilicia. \textit{Bonner} (1996) 138.

\textsuperscript{16} For prisons in the Near East, see Ibn Miskawayh I 54-55 and II 193; Ioannis Caminia\textsuperscript{i} 48; Bosworth (1993) 189. For prisons in Byzantium, see Al-\textsuperscript{T}abar\textsuperscript{i} III/4 2276-2277. Military confrontation between the Byzantines and the Tarsos people must have been extremely intense, because ibn Rusta in the early tenth century claims that one of the four major prisons in Constantinople was assigned to those who came from Tarsus. Ibn Rusta 120-121.
tinople via Ikonion, following the Route of the Cilician Gates. In another episode, when ‘Abd Allāh ibn Rashīd entered Byzantine territory via the Cilician Gates and was captured by Byzantine forces in a raid in 878, he was taken to Loulon, a city that stood at the entrance to the Cilician Gates, and then to Constantinople. The famous historian al-Ţabarī, who narrates in the early tenth century, adds a precious note regarding this episode: he [ibn Rashīd] was taken to Lu’lu’an and then on to the tyrant along the post road. This statement shows that captives were carried inside the Byzantine Empire through postal routes. The same holds true for the Islamic routes as well. The author of the vita of St. Ioannikios from the later ninth century puts it very clearly when he describes the story of Byzantine prisoners escaping from a prison in an unmentioned location: They [prisoners] followed the saint who led and transported them safely away from all the sentry posts watchtowers that the most wicked Hagarenes are accustomed to place on all the essential routes. Main routes on the Islamic frontier, manned with soldiers, must have been used for multiple purposes including transporting captives. Moreover, prisoners were exchanged in highly regular and ritualized prisoner exchanges in western Cilicia. The River of Lamis, which acted as a separation line between Byzantine mountainous Cilicia and the Islamic Cilician plain, was the scene of twelve major and six minor exchanges from 768 to 946. In order to ransom soldiers and civilians taken captive in raids, Muslims would leave from the city of Tarsos, where Byzantine captives were collected, and proceed to the mouth of the River of Lamis, where the Byzantines on their boats waited with captives of Near Eastern origin. A statement by al-Mas‘ūdī reveals the itinerary of the prisoners of Near Eastern origin who were brought to Lamis by the Byzantines. He writes that the prisoners were carried from Constantinople to Lamis via Pylai (modern Yalova), which lay to the southwest of the capital city and stood at the beginning of the land routes leading to the Anatolian plateau. The most viable land route connecting Pylai via the Anatolian plateau to Lamis was the Diagonal

17. Al-Ţabarī III/4 2193.
18. Al-Ţabarī III/3 1917. For the translation, see Al-Ţabarī, The Revolt of the Zanj 190.
19. For the postal system and roads in Byzantine Anatolia, see Avramea (2002) 59-60, 74-75.
21. Modern Lamas Su in the district of modern day Erdemli, Mersin.
22. For the list of prisoner exchanges between the Abbasids and the Byzantines, see Kolla-Dermitzaki (2000) 614-620. There were later prisoner exchanges when the Byzantine-Islamic frontier moved towards Syria in 960s, such as the exchange of 966 on the bank of Euphrates. Honigmann (1935) 82. For more information on these exchanges, see Campagnolo Pothitou (1995) 1-55; Khouri Al Odellallah (1983); Patoura (1994). For the performative nature of these exchanges, see Durak (forthcoming-a).
23. Al-Ţabarī III/4 227; Al-İştaḵhrī, 69; Ibn Ḥawkal 201.
24. Al-Mas‘ūdī 139-140.
Route (the route that started from the Byzantine city of Seleukeia, which lay to the west of Lamis, went north to cut across the Taurus Mountains through Claudiopolis, and reached the Anatolian plateau in Laranda).

The routes connecting the Syrian _thughûr_ to Byzantine Anatolia were frequently used in two other types of politically-motivated movements: movements of diplomats and deserters. As Ioannis Dimitroukas’ review shows, the routes through Cilicia were major highways used by diplomats moving between Constantinople and Umayyad Aleppo or Abbasid Baghdad. For example, ‘Abdal- Bâkî, a frontier leader of the early tenth century from Tarsus, escorted the Byzantine envoys twice, in 918 and 924, from the frontier to Baghdad via “the Euphrates Route.” The Euphrates Route was traditionally used to connect Baghdad to Byzantium via northern Syria along the Euphrates River. The route would start from Baghdad, proceed through al-Rakka, and enter Byzantium in Germanikeia or Melitene.

However, the Syrian _thughûr_ was not simply a stop for diplomats travelling between capital cities. It was occasionally a target of Byzantine diplomatic missions, while envoys from Cilicia visited Constantinople for negotiations. For example, in 859, Emperor Michael III sent a certain patrician with the title of _logothete_ to the city of Loulon because the Arabs of Loulon decided to deliver the fortress to the Byzantines. In the reverse direction, as we learn from the _De Ceremoniis_, Tarsiot envoys were present in Constantinople in the tenth century, and in 965, the people of Mopsuestia and Tarsos sent an envoy to the Emperor Nikephoros Phokas requesting to pay tribute in return for a truce. The Emperor received the envoy, but did not accept the request. The local envoys must have travelled through the Cilician Gates.

Routes through Cilicia also provided a major venue for deserters to escape into enemy territory. Wâṣîf, the eunuch of governor of Azerbaijan, sought refuge in 900 in Byzantium when the plans of Wâṣîf and his master ibn Abī al-Ṣâdj to overtake Egypt were revealed by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'taḍid. The Caliph captured Wâṣîf in Ain Zarba/Anazarbus in Cilicia while he was preparing to escape into the Byzantine territory. Similarly, Manuel, the _strategos_ of Anatolikon Theme, escaped through the “Syrian _Kleisurai_” to Baghdad during the reign of Theophilos around 829. Finally, the Byzantine general Andronikos Doukas, who served

---

27. Al-Ṭabarî III/3 1448.
30. Georgius Monachus Continuatus 796.
under Leo VI, revolted against the Byzantine state, and escaped to the Arabs in 906/907. The general left Ikonion (or Kabala near Ikonion) with his Christian fellows and two hundred Muslim prisoners, whom he freed, and approached the Muslims in Cilicia. In none of examples mentioned above is there a reference to a specific route that connected Cilicia to the Anatolian plateau. However, given the starting points and destinations of the deserters, it is very likely that the Route of the Cilician Gates or the Diagonal Route was traversed by the deserters in question.

All of the movements mentioned above resulted from political and/or military encounters. However, two categories of movement, those of merchants and pilgrims, took place outside the sphere of military confrontations or political negotiations. The role of trade, and especially international trade, on the Syrian frontier is a debate on which there is no consensus in the modern scholarship. However, as I attempt to show in another article, Arabic and Greek sources from the ninth and tenth centuries contain direct and indirect references to merchants, commercial routes, caravans, and infrastructure for commerce (such as markets and inns in cities and on the roads), all of which point to the Cilician passes as major commercial routes, if not the only ones, between the Islamic and Byzantine realms. Byzantine merchants were present in Cilician and Syrian cities in the mid- and later-tenth century, and Muslims from Syria visited frontier towns of the Byzantines in order to obtain various commodities during the same period. As the following story demonstrates, some merchants travelled further inland, beyond the immediate frontier. A Byzantine domestikos from Cappadocia, probably an important military official, made numerous appeals to ransom his son, who was captured by the Muslims and kept in Aleppo, sometime around the mid-tenth century. Failing to free his son, the domestikos appealed to a Christian perfume merchant from Aleppo, asking him to arrange the killing of his son, rather than leaving him in captivity.

The routes that were used for military attacks and carrying captives were also used for commercial purposes. Ibn Khurradādhbih presents the Route of the Cilician Gates as the main route connecting Baghdad to Constantinople in the later tenth century. He does not specifically say for what purposes the route was used, but the fact that he draws the attention of the reader to the transportation of vegetables from Nicaea to Constantinople on the same route tells us that he was aware of the commer-

32. Durak (forthcoming-b).
33. Three Byzantine Military Treatises 152, 162; Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth 156.
34. Ibn Shaddād 196.
cial use of the route. Moreover, the presence of a *funduq* (inn/hostel) to the north of Bozanti (Podandos/al-Badandun) on the same route demonstrates that there were merchants carrying commodities on this route. The eastern Germanikeia-Caesarea route was also a corridor for trade, because we know that there was *funduq* between Germanikeia and Samandu (Tzamandos)\(^\text{36}\). Finally, there must have been at least one route connecting Syria to Byzantium via the Byzantine city of Seleukeia, which was a central entry point for goods (specifically silk) coming from Syria in the early tenth century\(^\text{37}\). After arriving in Seleukeia, merchants and commodities could have followed 1. the Diagonal Route that was used for transporting captives; 2. the Mediterranean Coastal land Route from Seleukeia to Attaleia through the land\(^\text{38}\); 3. the sea route connecting Seleukeia to Attaleia and finally to Constantinople.

Finally, pilgrims traveled on trade routes in peaceful periods, and their presence supports the possibility of trade connections in the same region. As Michael McCormick shows, the western European pilgrims of the early Middle Ages (up to the year 800) followed the late antique pilgrimage route that passed through Constantinople or Ephesus, and then connected to the Holy Land via Cyprus, while those traveling to Palestine after 800 preferred the southern route via Egypt\(^\text{39}\). While westerners preferred sea routes rather than the Cilician land routes, the ancient pilgrimage route connecting Palestine to Constantinople via the Cilician Gates was used by the Byzantines from the Late Antique period to the central Middle Ages, as Ioannis Dimitroukas shows\(^\text{40}\). Among the saints who travelled to the Near East, we have Gregory Akritas who passed from Seleukeia to the holy land for pilgrimage in 780\(^\text{41}\); Michael Synkellos (d. 846), who travelled back from the holy land via Seleukeia\(^\text{42}\); and Constantine the Jew, who travelled to Cyprus via Attaleia, and on his way back used the Diagonal Route from Seleukeia to Nicaea sometime before 867 or 874\(^\text{43}\). These pilgrims may have made their way into Syria from Seleukeia either using Cilician routes or the sea routes. An interesting remark in Ḥudūd al-ʾĀlam, a later tenth cen-

\(^{36}\) Daḥābi in Vasilyev (1950) 241.

\(^{37}\) Eparchikon Biblion 94: τὰ ἐκ Συρίας ἐξερχόμενα ἐσθήματα, ὁποία δ’ ἂν ἔιεν, καὶ τὰ ἀπὸ Σελευκείας καὶ ἀλλαχόθεν εἰσερχόμενα χαρέρια.

\(^{38}\) For the use of this route for trade, see Ibn .Haw.kal 201; Al-Idrisi II 647.


\(^{41}\) AASS Novembris 372-374: ...ἀπάρας ἐπὶ τὴν Σελευκείαν ἔχεται, κάκει χρόνων οὐν ὁλίγαν ἐνδιατρίψας, ἀρτον βραχυτάτῳ καὶ ὕδατι ἔζη. τῷ δὲ εἰκοστῷ ἕκτῳ χρόνῳ τῆς ἡλικίας αὐτοῦ, ὅτε καὶ Λέων ὁ εἰκονομάχος τὸ ζῆν ἀπέρρηξε καὶ τὸ ὀρθόδοξον ἐπαρρησίατο, τὰ Ἱεροσόλυμα καταλαμβάνει...; McCormick (2001) 197.

\(^{42}\) The Life of Michael the Synkellos 60-61.

tury anonymous geography in Persian, shows that Cilicia was not only a stop along the greater pilgrimage to Palestine, but had its own pilgrimage centers. The coastal city of Avlās/Āyās (ancient Aigai) to the east of the Ceyhan River was home to *two places which the Byzantines venerate and to which they go on pilgrimage*⁴⁴.

In conclusion, when al-Muḥaddasi wrote that routes leading to Byzantium were used to transport prisoners, to send envoys, to invade, and to conduct trade, he not only informed his reader about the close relations between the Byzantines and Islamic empires, but he also indicated that the same routes were used by people whose interests in passing to the other side arose from diverse and occasionally contradictory motives. The present study is an attempt to show that even a relatively small frontier region such as Cilicia was home to extremely diverse movements of people in the ninth and tenth centuries. An exhaustive examination of all of Byzantium’s frontier regions facing the Islamic Near East, from the Caucasus in the east to Sicily in the west, would reveal an even more multifaceted relationship between the Byzantines and the Islamic Near Easterners of the early Middle Ages. The same situation applied to other parts of the Byzantine-Islamic frontier as well. For instance, Hārūn b. Yahyā, captured in Ascalon in the later ninth century, was first taken to Attaleia by boat. He was transported to Constantinople, his route cutting a direct line through Asia Minor. A century later, ibn Ḥawqal describes this route connecting Attaleia to Constantinople through central-western Anatolia as a busy commercial route⁴⁵. As these two cases show, the paths of merchants and captives coincided. Having answered in the context of early medieval Cilicia whether travelers with different motives made use of the same routes, the next step in this inquiry would be how the travelers in question covered the same routes. Did the merchants, pilgrims, and diplomats use the same infrastructure, boarding on the same boats and staying in the same inns? Did commerce and pilgrimage stop when armies traveled the routes in the region? And were there clear-cut distinctions among the categories of people moving between Byzantium and the Near East? In other words, could a diplomat or a soldier simultaneously act as a merchant and/or a pilgrim? Examining Greek and Arabic sources from the Middle Ages in the context of these questions will lead us from pondering about the infrastructure of roads to asking more nuanced questions about the infrastructure of coexistence on the roads.

⁴⁴. Hudūd al-ʿĀlam 147.
ABSTRACT

Cilicia, between Byzantine Anatolia and Islamic Syria, was one of the locations along the Byzantine-Islamic frontier where the movement of people between the two worlds was especially intense. The aim of this paper is first to identify which routes were used on the frontier in question and then to argue that the Cilician frontier in the ninth and tenth centuries acted as a venue for the exchange of people, not only for military purposes but for a variety of reasons ranging from diplomacy to pilgrimage. It is important to note that the same routes were used by people moving for different reasons. The present paper focuses on the initial stages of the intercourse across the frontier rather than pursuing the story into the heartlands of the Byzantine and Islamic empires.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


Theophanes Continuatus, I. Bekker (ed.), *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus* [Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, XXXIII]. Bonn 1838.


Secondary Sources


