

The 13th International Congress on Graeco-oriental and African Studies

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Distinguished scholars from many countries participated in the 13th International Congress on Graeco-Oriental and African Studies. The above Congress was taking place in Heraklion, Crete, and was organized by the Institute for Graeco-Oriental and African Studies (IGOAS) with the cooperation of the municipality of Heraklion-Vikelaia Library on 4-6 November 2011. Two main topics were discussed: 1. The Emirate of Crete from its establishment (ca824/ 6) until the reconquest of Crete by Nicephorus Phocas (961 AD), and 2. The Ports of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea (4th c. BC-13th c.AD). It should be noted that the Municipality of Heraklion–Vikelaia Library, provided excellent technical support and warm hospitality.

The Emirate of Crete has not been studied adequately although it was a frontier state similar to that of Sicily. Various aspects concerning the origin of the conquerors, their adventurous voyage through the Mediterranean, and their place of disembarkation are discussed. Moreover, their archaeological remains, which have only been partly discovered, were presented as well as some other relevant topics. Suffice it to mention here briefly some of the communications which were attended not only by specialists but also by many others interested.

The archaeologist L. Starida spoke about the remnants of several objects which have been found in Heraklion of Crete and presented a number of them in colored pictures. The archaeologist N. Gigourtakis presented a plan of the fortress constructed by the Byzantine general and later emperor Nicephorus II Phocas, after his reconquest of Crete. The aim of Nicephorus II Phocas was to fortify Crete and make it impregnable in order to avoid any other conquests. The defense of the island, which was located at a crucial strategic position and needed to be steadily secured against any efforts of the Arabs to reconquer it was well planned based on the instructions of the military treatises of the time (Taktika, etc.) and the military experience acquired. A. Mazarakis, Numismatic Museum of Athens, presented a number of coins used by the Andalusian conquerors and expressed the view that there was also a mint in the emirate of Crete.

Prof. V. Christides, director of the IGOAS, discussed the adventures of a group of Andalusians who were expelled from Cordova after their bloody revolution against the tyrannical emir Hakam (796-822), and after many adventures they landed in Crete (ca825/ 826). Prof. Christides reported that the dearth of information of all relevant sources requires their detailed scrutiny before any conclusions are drawn. The most important classical authors providing information about the adventures of the Andalusian refugees who conquered Crete are: al-Ṭabarī, al-Kindī, Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Khallikān. Important information is also offered by the Syriac author Michael the Syrian and and Copto-Arabic Severus. Unfortunately, the Byzantine sources, Theophanes and Nicolas the Patriarch of Constantinople, are inadequate.

Dr. Sophia Patoura, Director of Studies at the Institute of Byzantine Studies of the Hellenic National Research Foundation, spoke about the law of war as applied by both Byzantines and Arabs in their constant struggle in the Aegean, with special emphasis on the Arab capture of Thessaloniki (904) and Crete (961). Two interesting communications concerning the ports of Constantinople were given by Prof U. Kocabas of the University of Istanbul and Prof. A. Berger of the University of Munich. Prof. Berger's view is that in the recent findings of the relics of ships in Constantinople, the ships were not actually warships.

Dr. M. Leontsini, researcher at the Institute of Byzantine Studies of the Hellenic National Research Foundation, spoke about the situation on the Aegean islands during the time of the emirate of Crete. The writer sources and the archaeological evidence reflect the difficulties of navigation in the southern Aegean at this time. She described the topography of the islands and their types of ports. G. Al-Tahir, Instructor of the Libyan School of Athens, spoke about the port of Aydhab in the Red Sea, based on the Arabic sources. An analytical discussion of the naval activities of the Ḥimyarite Arabs on the Red Sea was presented by Prof. J. Ch. Robin, member of the French Academy. Prof. J. Desanges, member of the French Academy presented the most recent archaeological findings on the Red Sea ports.

Other communications beyond the main topics were also presented. Prof. J.P. Monferrer Sala spoke about "An Idumean between Nabateans and Romans. On the source-text of a passage in Maḥbūb al-Manbijī's Kitāb al-'Unwān". In this paper Prof. Monferrer-Sala gives some light on the the sources used by Maḥbūb in this story. The archaeologist Monique Longerstay spoke about new discoveries in the decoration of the "haouanet" of Tunisia (7thc. BC-1stc. AD). The political scientist and historical researcher G. Tsoutsos spoke about Piri Reis' Cartography of Crete and the Arab Tradition of the Emirate of Crete. In his paper, he examines the new elements that Piri Reis added to cartography and the Arab influences in his description of geography and history of Crete. Due to his unique personality, Piri Reis combined naval experience and science, thus making him, stand out from other cartographers before his time.