

Khalifa Umar bin al-Khattab - Expansion of Islam and Military Campaigns

The Muslims And The Sea

With the capture of Caesarea and other towns in Syria which were also ports, the Muslims stood on the shore of the Mediterranean. The capture of Alexandria in Egypt brought the Muslims still closer to the sea.

With the sea stretching before them, some of the Muslim warriors and administrators came to feel that the Muslims should become the masters of the sea as they had become the masters of the land.

After the conquest of Syria, the country was divided into three provinces. These were Northern Syria; Central Syria; and Southern Syria, with capitals at Emessa, Damascus, and Jerusalem respectively. Muawiyah was the Governor of Central Syria. He was an ambitious man, and he thought that the sea should be no barrier to the westward march of Islam. He also felt that even for the protection of Syria which was a coastal country, it was necessary that the Muslims should become a naval power. In order to protect the maritime frontiers of the Muslim dominions, Muawiyah was strongly of the view that the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean should be captured by the Muslims so as to serve as a base for naval operations.

After a good deal of thinking, Muawiyah wrote to Umar explaining his project, and seeking permission to lead an expedition to conquer Cyprus. Umar was not as ambitious as Muawiyah. Umar stood more for consolidation than expansion. He had his own prejudices against water. In all his instructions to his Generals Umar repeatedly emphasised 'let there be no expanse of water between you and me'. Umar had no idea of conquering any lands beyond the sea.

On receipt of the letter of Muawiyah, Umar thought fit to obtain the advice of Amr bin Al-Aas, the Conqueror of Egypt whose province was also washed by the Mediterranean. Amr bin Al-Aas expressed his views in the following terms:

"O Commander of the Faithful. I have seen a numerous people, going upon the sea, overpowered by a few. When it is calm it tends the heart, and when it is in motion it twists the brain. It weakens confidence and strengthens doubt. There is nothing there but sky and water. People at sea are like a worm in a log of wood. If their boat inclines they sink, and if they survive they are dazed."

Amr bin Al-Aas assessed the matter in a poetic vein, and not as a military commander of a nation commissioned by Allah to carry His message to all corners of the world. In view of Umar's own aversion to the sea this reply of Amr b. Al-Aas appealed to the Caliph, and on the basis of this letter, Umar wrote to Muawiyah as follows:

"We have heard that the Syrian Sea rises higher than the highest thing on earth; and that it seeks Allah's permission day and night to spread over the earth and drown it. So how can I send forces over this terrible infidel. By Him who sent Muhammad with the truth, I shall never send any Muslim upon it. The Muslim is dearer to me than the Roman whale. Beware of asking me again."

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