NIKEPHOROS PHOKAS AND THE BYZANTINE *RECONQUISTA* OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF CRETE (961 AD). AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

Matteo G. Randazzo
University of Edinburgh
United Kingdom

Date of receipt: 15th of September, 2021
Date of acceptance: 8th of March, 2022

Abstract

Nikephoros Phokas' defeat of the Islamic Emirate of Crete in 961 AD is one of the most renowned examples of *Reconquista* celebrated by ancient authors and dealt with by modern historians. Transcending its historical and contextual framework, both in the past as in the present, this case of *Reconquista* has often come to take on further symbolic meanings, as a paradigm of an ideological and political confrontation between the worlds of Christianity and Islam. The aim of this article is to reassess the significance of this episode, with specific regard to how it relates to the preceding period of the Emirate, questioning the extent to which it can be regarded as the prodigious event of liberation of the island celebrated by textual sources and modern folklore as an archetype of the 19th-century patriotic struggle against the Ottoman occupation of the island.

Keywords

Emirate of Crete; Nikephoros Phokas; Islamization; *Reconquista*; social equilibrium.

Capitalia Verba

Emirates Cretae, Nicephorus Phocas, Expansio dominationis Islamicae, Restauratio imperii, Aequalitas civium.

1. Introduction[1]

Nikephoros Phokas' defeat of the Islamic Emirate of Crete in 961 AD is one of the most renowned instances of *Reconquista* celebrated by ancient authors and dealt with by modern historians.[2] Ending a 130-year-long struggle for supremacy over the island, this event represented, at the same time, a prodigious success that secured for Phokas the glory of the imperial crown, marking a landmark achievement that brought Crete back into the orbit of the Byzantine Empire. Transcending its historical and contextual framework, both in the past and in the present, this *Reconquista* has often come to take on further symbolic meanings, as a paradigm of an ideological and political confrontation between the worlds of Christianity and Islam, *Graecitas* and *Arabicity*, good and evil (depending on the points of view), oppression and freedom.[3] The ghosts of the recent –and eventually repressive– Ottoman dominion of Crete in the 17th-19th century, still haunting the local popular imagination, probably contributed to forging a polarized and prejudicial perception of the Islamic Emirate (see literature review below).[4] Thus, in the popular imagination and anthology, the heroic Cretan resistance of the 19th century has come to be evocative of Phokas' *Reconquista*, both of involving a fight for the island's freedom from the oppressive Muslim yoke.[5] However, it should be noted, aside from a common adherence to the Islamic faith, the Muslims of the Cretan Emirate and those of the Ottoman period shared nothing in terms of their ideologies, social practices, and cultural backgrounds. Before the 15th-17th century, moreover, there is no evidence across the Islamic world of state-sponsored proselytisation and forced conversion; episodes of

1. The arguments presented in this article about the Emirate of Crete emerge from my PhD thesis, entitled "Sicily and Crete between Byzantium and the *Dar al-Islam* (late 7th – mid-10th century)"; specifically from Chapter 5 ("Economy and Administration"). The subjective considerations expressed about Phokas' *Reconquista* of Crete, instead, stem from a productive conversation with colleague and friend Z. Aletras on the divan of his house in Heraklion. I wish to thank this scholar for his persistent and selfless support, and also the editorial committee, especially A. García-Sanjuán, for the opportunity to include Crete in this thematic issue on the *Reconquista*. My thank-you goes also to my dear supervisor, J. Crow, and the copyeditor for proofreading and greatly improving the form of the text. I take full responsibility for any mistakes that might remain.

2. Primary textual sources contemporary with the events are: Theophanes Continuatus, Pseudo-Symeon, Theodosios Deacon, and Leo Deacon. See the general discussion in Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete: from the 5th Century to the Venetian Conquest*. Athens: Historical Publications S.D. Basilopoulos, 1988: 59-60. For a critical review of these texts in the Cretan context: Kaldellis, Anthony. "The Byzantine Conquest of Crete (961 AD), Prokopios' Vandal War, and the Continuator of the *Chronicle* of Symeon". *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 39/2 (2015): 302-311.

3. Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 59, describes this as "the creation of a whole 'cycle' of myths and legends concerning Crete and its recapture", the most famous of which is the prediction that whoever retook Crete was to become Emperor. See also the σταυροφορική [Crusader tone] of Phokas' request discussed in Takirtakoglou, Konstantinos. "Το Θρησκευτικό Στοιχείο στους Αγώνες του Νικηφόρου Β΄ Φωκά". Βυζαντιακά, 31 (2014): 107-128.

4. For a critical work on the late Ottoman policy on Crete: Şenışık, Pınar. *The Transformation of Ottoman Crete: Revolts, Politics and Identity in the Late Nineteenth Century*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2011.

5. My thoughts go, for instance, to Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *Freedom and Death*.

warfare apart, massacres of local inhabitants and forced mass conversions appear more in clichéd folktales than in modern scholarly literature.[6]

Hoping not to disappoint the reader, in this article I will not deal with Phokas' *Reconquista* of Crete *per se*. I lack, unfortunately, the historical competence and archaeological knowledge necessary to provide new insights on this event.[7] What I aim to do, instead, is to offer an alternative and original reading of this *Reconquista*, with specific regard to how it relates to the preceding period of the Emirate. This, it should be clarified from the outset, does not mean that I will champion a "negationist" view. The *Reconquista* of Crete is a historical fact that cannot be denied. Rather, what I aim to do is to challenge its significance, in an intentionally provocative manner. First, seeking to shun prejudices and misconceptions, and combining material evidence and textual sources, I will argue that soon after the Islamic takeover the whole of Crete came under the political authority and fiscal control of the Emirs. Outside the capital of the Emirate, however, it would seem that little had changed in terms of the conditions and, probably, the composition of preexisting local communities. Second, therefore, I will question the extent to which Phokas' *Reconquista* of Crete can be actually regarded as the prodigious event of liberation of the island celebrated by textual sources and modern folklore as an archetype of the 19th-century patriotic struggle against the Ottoman occupation and the ultimate success of the Cretans "fighting their way in joining the Greek state".[8]

2. Historical Background

According to the *Kitab Futuḥ al-Buldan*, written in the 9th century by al-Baladhuri (date 892), in the 820s a group of some 10,000 al-Andalusian Muslims, including warriors, jurists, elders, women and children, landed on Crete under the leadership of Abu Hafs (date 861).[9] The precise date of this landing in the 820s (ranging between 821 to 827) is debated, but this dispute has only marginal implications within the overall scope of this study, and could simply indicate a series of raids launched against the island as a prelude to its conquest.[10] Although of al-Andalus origin, this group of Muslims did not come directly from the Iberian Peninsula, but

6. For a recent synthesis: Peacock, Andrew C.S. "Introduction: Comparative Perspectives on Islamization", *Islamization: Comparative Perspectives from History*, Andrew C.S. Peacock, ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017: 5-7.

7. Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*... still represents the historical textbook of reference for this period. Archaeological research is still underdeveloped; see "Literature Review" section.

8. Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 90. To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be underscored that these words are devoid of irony.

9. Fundamental for a historical context: Christides, Vassilios. *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs (ca. 824). A Turning Point in the Struggle Between Byzantium and Islam*. Athens: Akademia Athenon, 1984.

10. For this argument: Gigourtakis, Nikos. "Ακρωτηρίω τώ Χάρακι'. Αρχικές Παρατηρήσεις για το Σημείο Απόβασης των Αράβων του Abu Hafs Omar στην Κρήτη", *Graeco-Arabica XI, ad Cretam Dedicata*, Eirini Chatzaki, ed. Heraklion: Institute for Graeco-Oriental and African Studies, 2011: 73-96. Picard,

rather from Alexandria, Egypt, where they had found asylum after being expelled from al-Andalus in 818 due to a failed rebellion against the Emir al-Hakam I (796-822).[11] Byzantium reacted immediately, launching at least three unsuccessful attempts at re-conquering the island between 829-843.[12] The exact geographical and chronological stages of the conquest are unknown. A series of historical circumstances and archaeological considerations, however, would indicate that by the 860s, when the son of Abu Hafs (Shu'ayb I 855-880) was ruling, the Emirate of Crete had been formally established and recognised by the Abbasid authority.[13] Likewise, by then a new capital had been founded, al-Handaq, on the site of modern Heraklion.[14] After this point, the Emirate of Crete lasted for about one century, until the future emperor Nikephoros Phokas restored it to Byzantine hands in 961, after military campaigns lasting nine months, mostly spent besieging al-Handaq.

The Islamic conquest of Crete constituted a major disruption on the geo-political stage of the Eastern Mediterranean: Crete had been a Roman province since the 1st century BC, and since then had represented a core region of the Byzantine Empire. This consideration is particularly true with regard to the 8th century when, through a series of reform measures, the Isaurian Dynasty strengthened the economic and administrative bonds intertwining this island with the central court in Constantinople.[15] In fact, while by the 8th century Byzantium had been deprived of fertile regions like Cyprus, Egypt, Syria, and North Africa, which had become targets of the Caliphs' *jihad* from the 7th century, it could still rely on its Cretan possession and revenues from taxes and agriculture, which became indispensable

---

Christophe. *Sea of the Caliphs. The Mediterranean in the Medieval Islamic World*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018: 220-225.

11. Christides, Vassilios. *The Conquest of Crete*…: 85, 164.

12. Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 41-46. Makrypoulias, Christos G. "Byzantine Expeditions Against the Emirate of Crete c. 825-949", *Graeco-Arabica VII-VIII*, Vassilios Christides, Theodore Papadopoullos, eds. Nicosia: Archbishop Makarios III Cultural Centre Bureau of the History of Cyprus, 2000: 347-362.

13. These are: 1) after 866 Byzantine emperors did not launch any military expeditions or attempts to recapture the island, until 912; 2) the Life of Saint Theodora, dating from circa 867, considers Crete no longer a Byzantine territory; 3) a letter from Pope Nicholas I (858-867) sent to Michael III, reclaiming the dioceses of Illyricum, mentions all of them except for Crete. Both these two omissions, although possibly accidental, could very well reflect the loss of the Byzantine jurisdiction over the island; 4), in the late 860s, the see of Crete was moved to Thessaloniki, even though it maintained its title; 5) a number of Arabic sources indicate that 865 was the last date for the Islamic conquest of Crete; 6) from the 860s onward an exponential increase is recorded of Islamic currency issued by the second Cretan emir, Shu'ayb I, while records of Byzantine coins circulating on the island evaporate between the emperors Theophilos (d. 842) and Leo VI (d. 912). See Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 208; Brooks, Ernest W. "The Arab Occupation of Crete". *English Historical Review*, 28 (1913): 438-443.

14. Randazzo, Matteo. "Knossos and Heraklion in the Byzantine-Islamic Transition (late 7th-mid-10th century). An Archaeological Perspective into Shifting Patterns of Settlement Ruralisation and Urbanisation in Medieval Crete". *Journal of Greek Archaeology*, 5 (2020): 448-467. The previous Roman and Byzantine capital of the island was Gortyn.

15. Laiou, Angeliki E.; Morrisson Cécile. *The Byzantine Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007: 43. This consideration is supported by sigillographic evidence and "the closer we come to the 9th century, the more official presence becomes manifest": Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 29.

means for the survival of Constantinople and the provisioning of the Empire.[16] Furthermore, owing to its liminal geographical location, Crete functioned as the maritime gateway to the Aegean world and, from there, a stepping stone to Constantinople. The establishment of the Islamic Emirate in Crete upset this *status quo*, creating the basis for what Christides came to call αραβικής θαλασσοκρατορίας.[17] The fact that Byzantium never accepted the creation of this Emirate can be seen in the multiple yet unsuccessful expeditions that were undertaken to recapture the island in 866, 912, and 949.[18] There is little doubt that the *Reconquista* of Crete, along with Tarsus and Cyprus in 961-965, brought renewed stability to the connectivity and commercial routes of the Byzantine Empire across the Eastern Mediterranean; it is hardly a coincidence that the decades following the conquest marked a period of expansion for the Empire, culminating with the reign of Basil II (976–1025).[19]

3. Literature Review

Both the period of the Islamic Emirate and the Byzantine *Reconquista* of Crete pose interpretative challenges and methodological problems for current scholarly research, and archaeological and historiographical studies have still much to clarify and accomplish.[20] The period of the Emirate of Crete, in particular, has remained systematically excluded by recent articles, volumes, and international workshops, which have investigated the world of the Mediterranean islands in the Middle Ages, examining all the islands from Cyprus to the Balearics, but not Crete, save for some cursory mentions.[21]

Regarding historical research on the Emirate, two main attitudes have emerged since the beginning of the 20th century. One approach, noticeably derogatory and reactionary, was prevalent in the historiographical research of the first half of the 20th century, depicting the period of the Islamic Emirate of Crete as one marked by

16. Picard, Christophe. *Sea of the Caliphs*….: 85-91. Laiou, Angeliki; Morrisson Cécile. *The Byzantine Economy*...: 43.

17. See Christides, Vassilios. *The Conquest of Crete*…: 91. See also Takirtakoglou, Konstantinos. " Οι Πόλεμοι Μεταξύ του Νικηφόρου Φωκά και των Αράβων". *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 25 (2015): 57-114.

18. Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 58-74. Makrypoulias, Christos "Byzantine Expeditions…".

19. See Shepard, Jonathan. "Equilibrium to Expansion (886–1025)", *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire c. 500-1492*, Jonathan Shepard ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008: 493-536.

20. Crete's immense and sensational Minoan and Classical/Roman cultural heritages might be considered one of the causes for the struggle of medieval research to emerge and affirm itself as a discipline.

21. For instance: Zavagno, Luca. "Islands not the Last Frontier: insular model in Early Medieval Mediterranean (ca. 650-ca. 850)", *Borders and Conflict in the Mediterranean Basin*, Giuseppe D'Angelo, Jorge Martins Ribeiro, eds. Fisciano: Mediterranean Knowledge. International Centre for Studies and Research, 2016: 55-77. Zavagno, Luca; Darley, Rebecca; Jarrett, Jonathan, eds. "Not the last Frontier: The World of Medieval Islands". *Al-Masaq*, 31/2 (2019): 129-139.

the collapse of socioeconomic activities and the decline of urban and rural life.[22] Plundering, piracy, and slave trading were seen as the quintessential socioeconomic pillars of the Emirate. It was also taken for granted that the new Muslim rulers oppressed the pre-existing Christian inhabitants of the island, who were deprived of their possessions, slaughtered, and forced to convert or to flee to inland hilltops and uplands for their safety. This view climaxed in Ostrogorsky's stigmatizing words that the Emirate of Crete was nothing but a "corsair's nest".[23] In the early 1960s scholars such as Tomadakis, Panagiotakis, and Miles challenged this view, rejecting the previous exaggerations of alleged forced conversions and the annihilation of the local population.[24] Above all, this revisionism was based on critical readings of Arabic and Byzantine primary sources. In the 1980s Christides paved the way for the emergence of a ground-breaking view of the Emirate, then upheld as a positive example of an Islamic state.[25] A similarly positive (or less pessimistic, rather) view of the Emirate was embraced a few years later by Tsougarakis, whose monumental volume on the history of the island between the 5th and early 13th centuries can still be regarded as the most thorough scholarly source of information available. In spite of the efforts made by these scholars, the stigmatizing words of Ostrogorsky left wounds too deep to be healed easily and, as late as the 1990s, a professor of history at the University of Crete wrote these very judgmental and rather questionable words: "The Arab presence was very severe for the native inhabitants of Crete, who were plunged into a long period of harsh servitude. Crete became detached from the Byzantine Empire and disappeared from the civilised world, to a very rudimental form of lifestyle".[26]

Since these words were written, Christides and Tsougarakis have revisited the Emirate of Crete in articles and edited volumes, all of which convey a positive view of the Islamic rule.[27] However, their efforts as historians have not been paralleled by a similar archaeological approach, and Islamic archaeology as a discipline has not yet emerged in Crete. Significant grey areas remain and, as late as 2011, a leading

22. For instance: Sefakas, Yorgos A. "Ἡ ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀραβων Κατάκτησις τῆς Κρήτης". Επετηρὶς Ἑταιρείας Κρητικῶν Σπουδῶν, 2 (1939): 20-80; Papadopoulos, Ioannis B. Η Κρήτη υπό τους Σαρακηνούς *(824-961)*. Athens: Byzantinisch - Neugriechischen Jahrbuecher, 1948.

23. Ostrogorsky, Georgije. *History of the Byzantine State*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1957: 282.

24. Tomadakis, Nikos. "Προβλήματα τῆς ἐν Κρήτη Ἀραβοκρατίας (826-961)". Επετηρὶς Ἑταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν, 30 (1960): 1-38; Panagiotakis, Nikolaos. "Ζητήματά τινα τῆς Κατακτήσεως τῆς Κρήτης ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀράβων". Κρητικὰ Χρονικὰ, 15-16 (1961-1962): 9-41; Miles, George C. "Byzantium and the Arabs: Relations in Crete and the Aegean Area". *Dumbarton Oaks Papers,* 18 (1964): 1-32.

25. Christides, Vassilios. *The Conquest of Crete*…; Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*….

26. Detorakis, Theocharis E. *History of Crete*. Heraklion: Irakion, 1994: 125.

27. Most notably: Christides, Vassilios. "Creta, Enlace Entre Oriente y Occidente", *Al-Andalus y el Mediterráneo en torno al año mil: la Época de Almanozor*, Antonio Torremocha Silva, Virgilio Martínez Enamorado, eds. Algeciras: Fundación Municipal de Cultura José Luis Cano, 2003: 215-224; Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. "Rites of Passage. Από την Υστερορρωμαϊκή στη βυζαντινή Κρήτη: Οικιστική Εξέλιξη και Κοινωνικοί Μετασχηματισμοί", *Proceedings of the 10th Cretological International Conference*, Eratosthenēs G. Kapsomenos, Maria Andreadaki-Vlazaki, Michalis Andrianakis, eds. Chania: Literary Society Chryssostomos, 2011: 281- 307.

exponent of medieval Cretan archaeology, Poulou, wrote that "the Arab conquest creates a gap of knowledge in material culture and daily life of the island".[28] Since then, little has changed. For instance, at three important Cretan archaeological conferences of the last decade (i.e. the 3rd and 4th *Archaiologiko Ergo Kretes* [2015 and 2020] and the 12th International Congress of Cretan Studies [2016]), contributors jumped from the first to the second Byzantine period, without any discussion of the archaeological evidence pertaining to the intervening years of Islamic rule, exemplifying a lack of scholarly interest in the archaeology of the Islamic period.[29] Among the few but notable exceptions there is one article published in 2016 by Starida, which offers an extraordinary snapshot of the urban fabric of al-Handaq; and two articles that I published in 2019 and 2020, the former containing the available corpus of material sources dating to the period of the Emirate, and the latter discussing the process behind the development of the Emirate's capital.[30]

A similar picture of erratic archaeological and historical evidence recurs with respect to the initial decades of the second Byzantine period. Following the wealth of contemporary textual sources dealing with the brief period of Phokas' *Reconquista* (960-61), Crete faded from mention, and there are almost no written accounts for nearly a century after 961.[31] The same is strikingly true regarding the paradoxical scarcity of source material. For the decades following the *Reconquista*, the current literature review can only rely on a few examples of structural remains, the most notable of which is the fortification at Temenos, a handful of coins of the "anonymous type", and a few religious architectural features.[32] It is not until the mid-11th century

28. Poulou, Natalia. "Τεκμήρια υλικού Πολιτισμού στην Βυζαντινή Κρήτη: 7ος-12ος αι", *Proceedings of the 10th Cretological International Conference*, Eratosthenēs G. Kapsomenos, Maria Andreadaki-Vlazaki, Michalis Andrianakis, eds. Chania: Literary Society Chryssostomos, 2011: 382; Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. "Rites of passage..": 293.

29. Karanastasi, Pavlina; Tzigounaki, Anastasia; Tsigonaki, Christina. *Archaeological Work in Crete 3*. Rethymno: Faculty of Letters Publication, 2015; Karanastasi, Pavlina; Tzigounaki, Anastasia; Tsigonaki, Christina. *Archaeological Work in Crete 4*. Rethymno: Faculty of Letters Publication, 2020. For the online proceedings of the 12th International Congress of Cretan Studies: <https://12iccs.proceedings.gr/en/>. The only exception being Zacharia Aletras poster Η συνέχεια της αστικής ζωής στο μεσοβυζαντινό Χάνδακα: οι λουτρικές εγκαταστάσεις presented at the 12th International Congress of Cretan Studies (2016), in which some Islamic coins and oil lamps are featured.

30. Starida, Liana. "Αρχιτεκτονικά Κατάλοιπα στο Ηράκλειο από την Περίοδο της Αραβοκρατίας", Μαργαρίται. Μελέτες στη Μνήμη του Μανόλη Μπορμπουδάκη, Manolis S. Patetakis, Kostas D. Yapitsoglou, eds. Siteia: Κοινωφελές Ίδρυμα «Παναγία η Ακρωτηριανή» Ιεράς Μητροπόλεως Ιεραπύτνης και Σητείας, 2016: 58-76. Randazzo, Matteo. "Archaeological Approaches to the Islamic Emirate of Crete (820s-961 CE): a Starting Point". *Journal of Greek Archaeology*, 4 (2019): 311-336; Randazzo, Matteo. "Knossos and Heraklion…".

31. Some significant exceptions are the bios of Saint Nikos Metanoeite and Saint John Xenos, as well as Θέμα Κρήτης and Στρατηγός Κρήτης: Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 75-76.

32. For the Temenos, most recently: Mavritsaki, Maria. "The Temenos Fortress". *Archaeological Work on Crete 2*, Michalis Andrianakis, Petroula Varthalitou, Iris Tzachili, eds. Rethymno: Faculty of Letters Publication, 2012: 374-381. For the coins: Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 265-266. For an example of religious building that could present architectural features dating to the second half of the 10th century: Sythiakaki, Vassiliki "The Byzantine Sculptures of the Catholicon of the Paliani Monastery and their Role in the Clarification of the Monument's Building History", *Archaeological Work in Crete 4*, Pavlina Karanastasi, Anastasia Tzigounaki, Christina Tsigonaki, eds. Rethymno: Faculty of Letters Publication, 2020: 211.

that textual sources and evidence of material culture, including ceramics, coins, and structures, become systematic in the historiographical and archaeological record, reaching a peak during the 12th century.[33]

4. Methodological framework

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to include a brief methodological and conceptual discussion regarding the notion and process(es) of Islamization, which is pivotal in the argument that follows. First of all, it should be made clear that there is no sole definition of Islamization, and different scholarly disciplines apply to this term a wide range of differing defining attributes, semantic nuances, conceptual meanings, and practical implications, spanning religious conversion, adherence to linguistic and legislative models, military and political activities, forms of education, economic activities, civic life, changing patterns in the record of daily material culture, urban fabrics, settlement patterns, and the list goes on.[34] Because this author is an archaeologist, archaeological evidence will occupy a special place in the framework of this study, although textual sources will be equally considered, though always by drawing on secondary literature.

Secondly (and directly linked to the first point): categories of archaeological evidence indicative of Islamic influence can exist without conversion to Islam taking place.[35] Thus, the term "Islamization" has a sociocultural meaning, and not a religious one, for which the term "Muslim" is preferred. The religious component certainly played a fundamental role in the process of Islamization. Archaeologically, however, this can only be detected by means of specific evidence, such as places of worship and burials, which have yet not been identified in the Cretan record. Similarly, by "Islamization" we do not refer to an ethnic phenomenon; though as with religion, ethnicity would have played a major role, and the manifestation of ethnicity is not beyond the possibilities of archaeological interpretation.[36] But its investigation requires a comprehensive contextual framework, currently unavailable for Crete.

33. Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 81; 253. Poulou, Natalia. "Τεκμήρια υλικού Πολιτισμού…".

34. See: Insoll, Timothy. *The Archaeology of Islam*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999; Withcomb, Donald. "Introduction: the Spread of Islam and Islamic Archaeology", *Changing Social Identity with the Spread of Islam. Archaeological Perspectives*, Donald Withcomb, ed. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2004: 1-7; Gilotte, Sophie; Nef, Annalise. "L'apport de l'Archéologie, de la Numismatique et de la Sigillographie à l'Histoire de l'Islamization de l'Occident Musulman: en Guise d'Introduction", *Islamization et arabisation de l'Occident musulman médiéval (viie-xiie siècle)*, Dominique Valérian, ed. Paris : Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2011 : 63-99 ; Peacock, Andrew C.S., ed. *Islamization: Comparative Perspectives from History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

35. Insoll, Timothy. *Islam, Archaeology and History in the Gao Region (Mali) ca. AD 900 - 1250*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 81. For the opposite opinion that the use "Islamization" should be limited to the forms of material culture associated with religious practice: Molinari, Alessandra. "Sicily", *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Archaeology*, Bethany J. Walker, Timothy Insoll, Corisande Fenwick, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021: 337.

36. See papers in: Insoll. Timothy, ed. *The Archaeology of Identities: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 2007.

For instance, environmental and genetic analyses, which could reveal dietary and hereditary markers compatible with a Muslim population, have not been conducted in the context of the Cretan Emirate. On the contrary, Muslim communities and Islamic precepts may be recognized archaeologically as elements of a possible "package" including dietary habits, therefore pottery, and personal possessions, such as dress accessories, and aspects of the domestic and public sphere, comprising the built environment. These elements could be considered to transcend ethnicity, and might be used to characterize an overall cultural and social identity. Thus, artefacts such as pottery, coins, and some highly revealing small finds constitute the best available evidence at the disposal of the argument advanced in this study.[37] Surely, exceptions to every proposed structuring principle can, and did occur; not all Muslims lived in typical "Islamic houses", alcohol was drunk, prohibited food consumed, and the list continues.

Finally, the cultural background of the first groups of Muslims conquering Crete has been omitted so far as the concept of Islamization is concerned in this study. This is not because this issue is irrelevant. On the contrary, based on recent scholarly investigations of al-Andalus, it is possible to assume that the first generations of conquerors brought with them a "cultural package" that was crucial for the subsequent formation of a fully Islamized range of material culture.[38] For Crete, however, we do not possess comparable knowledge of material culture dating to the first generations after the conquest, so similar assumptions cannot be made.

According to the evidence available for Crete, a conceptual division has been drawn here between two main stages/processes of Islamization, each having different implications. This twofold division is between what has been defined as "institutional" and "cultural" Islamization.[39] Making no claims to universal validity, this division is, above all, key to the argument that follows. In a nutshell, institutional Islamization is related to political, economic, and administrative practices linked to the expansion and consolidation of Islamic state authority over non-Islamic territories and communities. Cultural Islamization, on the other hand, is a further step, implying the appearance of local communities, whose range of material culture, declined between portable items and the built environment, shows adherence to or integration into sociocultural practices that were shared with the broader *koine* of the Islamic world.[40]

---

37. Morony, Michael G. *Identity and Material Culture in the Early Islamic World*. Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles Near East Centre Colloquium Series, 1995: 2-7; Insoll, Timothy. *The Archaeology of Islam*...: 93.

38. Carvajal López, José C. "After the Conquest: Ceramics and Migration". *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 11/3 (2019): 323-341.

39. See : Gilotte, Sophie; Nef, Annalise. "L'apport de l'Archéologie…": 65.

40. Definition shaped after: Ardizzone, Fabiola; Nef, Annalise. "Les Dynamiques de l'Islamization en Méditerranée Centrale et en Sicile: Variations d'échelle", *Les dynamiques de l'islamization en Méditerranée centrale et en Sicile: nouvelles propositions et découvertes récentes,* Annalise Nef, Fabiola Ardizzone, eds. Rome - Bari: Edipuglia, 2014: 8-9; Molinari, Alessandra. "'Islamization' and the Rural World: Sicily and al-Andalus. What kind of Archaeology?", *New Directions in Early Medieval European Archaeology: Spain and Italy Compared. Essays for Riccardo Francovich*, Sauro Gelichi, Richard Hodges, eds. Turnhout: Brepols, 2015:

Referring to the establishment of state structures, institutional Islamization can be seen from an archaeological perspective in the *mis en place* of economic and administrative devices in order to gain fiscal control and expand Islamic authority over non-Islamic communities. Coins, for example, samples of which are plentiful on Crete, are clear evidence of both ideological and economic control.[41] By introducing coins into local economies with distinctive names, formulas, and metrology, Muslim rulers were affirming their political power while providing economic means by which to carry out transactions and perform tax collection. Their use by the pre-existing population, however, does not mean that local communities had been integrated into the Islamic cultural milieu, but only that economic interactions were occurring between them and the Islamic monetary system. As will be seen, this point seems to fit perfectly in the Cretan case-study.

Regarding cultural Islamization, leaving the personal background of the conquerors aside, this stage comes second to institutional Islamization, as the cultural assimilation of the conquered communities rarely immediately followed military conquest.[42] The Cretan case-study, moreover, will demonstrate that cultural Islamization was not a natural development following the previous stage of institutional Islamization, but rather a process that needed to be pursued and promoted by the central authority. Cultural Islamization, understood as synonymous with the creation or assimilation of local communities into the *Dar al-Islam*, concerns language, religion, and material culture, with its multiple arrays of everyday objects and public architectures and domestic buildings. Regarding language, the scattered nature of the material sources available in Crete allows us to gain but a superficial glance into the linguistic interactions and overall shifting patterns occurring over one century on the island. At the level of pre-existing communities, in particular, it does not permit us to assert how, when, and on which social level the linguistic substratum changed from the 9th to the mid-10th century, and if it changed at all, considering that institutional and spoken languages did not usually overlap. With regard to religion, both necropolises and places of worship are excellent indicators of changing models of belief.[43] Written sources (for example *Kaminiates*) do mention the existence of mosques in Crete in the early 10th century. When it comes to the archaeological record, however, evidence of mosques and burials is lacking, even in the capital al-Handaq, where, instead, we do have structural evidence of domestic urban architecture.

Therefore, among the classes of archaeological evidence outlined above, ceramics seem to be the sole category available to provide enough insights to reconstruct more complex aspects of daily life and socioeconomic realities revealing cultural

191-192; Carvajal López, José C. "Islamicisation or islamicisations? Islamic expansion and social practice in the Vega of Granada (South East Spain)". *World Archaeology*, 45 (2013): 59, 68.

41. Gilotte, Sophie; Nef, Annalise. "L'apport de l'Archéologie…": 66; Heidemann, Stephen. "Numismatic", *New Cambridge History of Islam,* Chase F. Robinson, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: I, 648-650.

42. Withcomb, Donald. "Introduction: the Spread of Islam…": 1-7.

43. Among many others: Gilotte, Sophie; Nef, Annalise. "L'apport de l'Archéologie…": 70-79 ; Insoll, Timothy. *Islam, Archaeology and History*…: 43.

Islamization. Careful evaluation of the morphologies and technical features of ceramic assemblages, in fact, could grant us closer insights into aspects of daily habits, domestic practices, technical expertise, economic activities, and the culinary tastes of the recently arrived Islamic community on Crete. As Arthur has note, "food and eating habits, almost like language, made up a fundamental element in the definition of cultural groups and in differentiating foreigners".[44] Ceramic items, in particular, are essential and transversal elements of pre-modern domestic life, and, therefore, reflections of practices and customs of the social groups that designed, crafted, used, and disposed of them.[45] This is particularly illuminating with regard to the 9th century, when it would appear that a general change in material culture occurred across almost the entire *Dar al-Islam*, in which a standardised assemblage of pottery was adopted, perhaps from the modern territories of Iraq, Iran, and Egypt, for cooking, serving, and storing food and liquids.[46] This point, of course, should not be taken in absolute terms, as the process of cultural assimilation was nuanced. In fact, besides the introduction of a standardised record of pottery, different regions of the Islamic world, even neighbouring, maintained distinctive productions of domestic pottery, which often reveal technical or decorative connections to previous traditions of ceramic production.

5. Crete under Islamic rule: did changing everything change nothing, or little?

By combing textual sources and the record of structural remains that emerged during urban excavations conducted in Heraklion since the 1950s, it is possible to achieve a fairly detailed picture of the urban fabric of the capital of the Islamic Emirate. For instance, examples of domestic architecture have consistently been uncovered at various points on the modern city centre, including at Kastella and under the streets of Koroneou, Almirou, and Byron-Thalita.[47] These examples consist of well-built rectangular rooms organized around central atria. Inner walls were covered in white and coloured plaster, floors were well paved with stone slabs, laid down on a preparatory layer of beaten earth, and spolia appear quite

44. Arthur, Paul. "Pots and Boundaries. On Cultural and Economic Areas Between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages", *Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking-wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean II. Archaeology and Archaeometry*, Michel Bonifay, Jean C. Tréglia, eds. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007: 20.

45. See: Carvajal López, José C. "After the Conquest..": 1.

46. See, among many others: Anderson, Glair D.; Fenwick, Corisande; Rosser-Ower Mariam. "The Aghlabids and Their Neighbours: An Introduction", *The Aghlabids and their Neighbours. Art and Material Culture in Ninth-Century North Africa*, Glaire D. Anderson, Corisande Fenwick, Mariam Rosser-Owen, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2017: 5-7, 23-24; Magness, Jody. "Early Islamic Pottery: A Revolution in Diet and Dining Habits?", *Proceedings of the 6th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, Paolo Matthiae, Frances Pinnock, Lorenzo Nigro, Nicolò Marchetti, eds. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007: 129-142; Insoll, Timothy. *The Archaeology of Islam*...: 232.

47. Starida, Liana. "Αρχιτεκτονικά Κατάλοιπα…".

frequently, such as column shafts used as doorways. Water wells are documented in the open-air central yards, which were crossed by complex system of pipes, for both drawing and draining water. Advanced water supply systems were already in place in Byzantine Crete, but similar structural parallels do not appear on the island.[48] By contrast, these available examples of domestic architecture perfectly match the iconic "Islamic courtyard houses", whose standard module, in the words of Fentress, offers a "consistent pattern in domestic architecture of the 9th-10th century, which can be found from Spain to the Persian Gulf".[49]

Domestic architecture apart, current archaeological knowledge lacks evidence of iconic Islamic buildings and architectural elements, such as *suqs* (marketplaces) and mosques, which are among the most representative structural features of "Islamic cities".[50] Textual sources, however, paint a different picture. Accounts written by contemporary authors, such as Kaminiates, Leo Deacon, and Theodosius Deacon, describe *suqs*, mosques, a 'royal palace/citadel' (*dar al-imara*), a well-organized port, and a monumental circuit wall.[51] Notwithstanding the rhetorical and literary nature of these texts, these features find precise parallels in the urban fabric of other prominent cities of the Islamic world, allowing us to place al-Hanqad and its *forma urbis* at the same levels of urban development as other cities of the *Dar al-Islam*.[52]

Considering "portable" items, although the number of extant material sources is limited, a careful analysis of the ceramic evidence available provides a glimpse into the range of daily material culture used by the citizens of al-Handaq. In particular, a relatively small but highly significant corpus of ceramics uncovered during the Kastella urban excavations is displayed at the Historical Museum of Crete (IMK), and has been studied by this author.[53] The spectrum of pottery is almost complete in terms of dining ceramics and tableware, encompassing glazed and unglazed

48. See, for instance, the 7th-8th century houses in the "Byzantine neighbourhood" of Gortyn: Di Vita, Antonino. *Gortina di Creta. Quindici Secoli di Vita Urbana*. Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2010: 248, illustration 365.

49. Fentress, Elisabeth. "The House of the Prophet: Islamic Housing in North Africa". *Archeologia Medievale*, 14 (1988): 62. See also: Fentress, Elisabeth. "Reconsidering Islamic Houses in the Maghreb", *De la estructura doméstica al espacio social. Lecturas Arqueológicas del Uso Social del Espacio*, Sonia Gutiérrez Lloret, Ignasi Grau Mira, eds. Alicante: Publicacions Universitat d'Alcant, 2013: 237-244.

50. The secondary literature is ample. For a pioneering work: Kennedy, Hugh. "From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria". *Past and Present*, 106 (1985): 3-27. More recently: Insoll, Timothy. *Islam, Archaeology and History*…: 42-43; Walmsley, Alan. "Remodelling Urban Landscapes: the Christian and Muslim Impact on the Cities of Syria-Palestine", *The "Dead Cities" of Northern Syria and their Demise*, Thomas Riis, ed. Kiel: Verlag Ludwig, 2015: 131-151; Gutiérrez Lloret, Sonia; Grau Mira, Ignasi, eds. *De la Estructura Doméstica al Espacio Social. Lecturas Arqueológicas del Uso Social del Espacio*. Alicante: Publicacions Universitat d'Alcant, 2013.

51. Melville-Jones, John; Frendo, David; Fotiou, Ahanasios. *John Kaminiates. The Capture of Thessaloniki*. Perth: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2000: 115-123; Talbot, Alice M.; Sullivan, Denis F. *The History of Leo the Deacon. Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*. Washington: Dumbarton Oak Studies, 2005: 64-75; Criscuolo, Ugo. *Theodosii Diaconi de Creta capta*. Leipzig: Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana, 1979.

52. In addition to footnote 49, see essays in: Jayyusi, Salma K.; Holod, Renata; Petruccioli, Antillio; Raymond André, eds. *The City in the Islamic World*. Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2008.

53. Ranzazzo, Matteo. "Archaeological Approaches…".

tableware, including two Middle Eastern ewers, a bowl from Cordoba, a bottle and a range of cups, mugs, drinking pitches, and oil lamps. The bottle, cups, and oil lamps could well be local products, but they present precise morphological, decorative, and technological parallels with pottery dating to the 9th-10th century from other regions of the *Dar-al Islam*, especially (and unsurprisingly) from Egypt and al-Andalus. This corpus of ceramics from the Historical Museum of Crete offers an insight into the integration of Handaqi citizens' patterns of consumption within that of other contemporary regions of the *Dar al-Islam*, revealing how the Muslims of Crete might have shared common culinary and social habits with the broader Islamic worlds.

Based on the range of evidence discussed above, it seems reasonable to conclude that everything changed for this site and its urban fabric; during the period of the emirate, Heraklion turned, irreversibly, from an annex of Knossos, a role that it had performed since Minoan times, to the capital city of the Emirate.[54] The question is: what happened outside Heraklion? In other words, did the Islamic conquest affect the status quo of the pre-existing population?

Setting momentarily ceramic evidence aside, the Cretan archaeological record yields consistent evidence of coins recorded at a significant number of sites across the island's countryside, which accounts for about 150 specimens.[55] The evidence of these coins can be interpreted on two levels: one based on the dissimilar volumes of coins issued by different emirs during the period of the Emirate; the second considering the geographical distribution of these atrifacts across the island. Regarding the first point, Miles divided his corpus of 268 coins of the Emirate into three chronological macro-groups. Group 1, was comprised of coins minted by Abu Hafs, which accounts for only two specimens. Group 2 was of coins minted by Abu Hafs' son, Shu'ayb I, from the 860s throughout the second half of the 9th century. This is the largest one, with 211 coins, accounting for nearly 80% of the total. Finally, Group 3 includes the remaining 45 coins minted by Cretan emirs throughout the first half of the 10th century. The exponential increase in the circulation of coins across the island at the time of Shu'ayb I, with evidence growing from a handful to hundreds, which might attest to the effort made by this Emir to consolidate the political and economic authority of the Emirate after the initial decades of military conquest.

Regarding spatial distribution, in the case of 47 coins it is possible to pinpoint the exact sites of their recovery.[56] The bulk of this evidence is particularly concentrated in central Crete; specifically, at 29 sites clustered in the rural districts of Heraklion (including Pediada), the Messarà Plain (around Gortyn), Mylopotamos Plain (surrounding Eleutherna), and the Monofatsi Plain (around Arcadia).[57] These topographic basins were the principal economic and demographic hubs of the island

54. Randazzo, Matteo. "Knossos and Heraklion…".

55. Miles, George C. *The Coinage of the Arab Amirs of Crete*. New York: American Numismatic Society, 1970.

56. This number does not include the more than 350 coins from Heraklion.

57. Randazzo, Matteo. "Archaeological Approaches…": 323-328.

during the preceding Byzantine period.[58] This distributive pattern suggests that intensive agricultural activities continued to be conducted in Crete's most fertile areas during the Islamic period. Thus, on the assumption that *a certain proportion* of these coins may, in fact, reflect economic and broader human activities at their sites of recovery, it would seem that it took only two generations for the new al-Andalusian rulers to effect the institutional Islamization of the island, and that by the late 9th century most of Crete had come to be under Islamic fiscal and political authority.[59] However, in line with the methodological framework discussed above, it is not possible to extrapolate the economic value of these coins by attaching sociocultural significance to them, i.e. it is not possible to consider these coins as proxy of Islamic settlers. Ceramic evidence must, therefore, be brought back into discussion.

The recovery of highly distinctive Islamic ceramics (such as those from the Historical Museum of Crete) at those sites where Islamic coins have been found could offer indications of settled communities that were integrated into the cultural, and not merely economic, sphere of the *Dar al-Islam*. However, with all the biases of patchy archaeological research, almost no examples of Islamic pottery have been documented at Cretan sites outside Heraklion. There are only two exceptions. One is Knossos, which lies in the vicinity of Heraklion, such that it should be considered part of the agricultural hinterland of the capital rather than as a distinctive unit.[60] The other is Vyzari, a site in the middle of the Amari Valleys, in inland Crete. Archaeological excavations at this site were conducted in the late 1950s and uncovered the remnants of a three-nave basilica dated to the 7th-8th century according to its structural features.[61] During the excavations two Islamic coins of Cretan Emirs, one dating from 860s-900s, and the other between 910s-950s, were found in a stratum called β, which covered the layers of destruction of the basilica. A modest assemblage of ceramics was found in association with these coins. Although a scientific restudy of these ceramics has not been conducted, a revaluation of black-and-white photos allows us to single out distinctive vessels that could well belong to the Islamic material culture of the period. Among these there was a one-handled mug, featuring very close morphological parallels with contemporary pieces from

58. See: Tsigonaki, Christina; Sarris, Apostolos. "Recapturing the Dynamics of the Early Byzantine Settlements in Crete: Old Problems-New Interpretations through an Interdisciplinary Approach", *Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinary Research in Landscape Archaeology*, Gert-Jan Burgers, Sjoerd J. Kluiving, Jeremia Pelgrom, Corine Tetteroo, eds. Amsterdam: The Interfaculty Research Institute for Culture, Cognition, History and Heritage, 2016: 1-11.

59. It should be noted that current hypotheses are limited by the fact that, regrettably, the most evidence (18 sites out of 29) consist of single finds, although a few notable exceptions, fortunately exist, such as Archanes, Phaistos, and Kastelli Pediados.

60. For this argument: Randazzo, Matteo. "Knossos and Heraklion…".

61. Kalokiris, Konstantinos D. "Η Βασιλική τής βυζαντινής Συβρίτου". *Κρητικά Χρονικά* 13 (1959): 7-38; Sanders, Ian F. *Roman Crete. An Archaeological Survey and Gazetteer of Late Hellenistic, Roman and Early Byzantine Crete*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1982: 115-117.

various regions across the *Dar al-Islam*,[62] and an oil lamp identical in shape to the ones documented in Heraklion, therefore representing the most solid indication of contemporary Islamic material culture at this far-inland site. Moreover, in 1901 a cache featuring a solidus of Romanos II (946-959) and jewellery, inscribed in Kufic and bearing Arabic names and formulas of the Islamic faith, was found 10 km away from Vyzari (Mesonisi village).[63] This might represent further compelling evidence of Muslim communities inhabiting this inland area of the island.

With this sole exception, the pattern of the absence of Islamic pottery outside Heraklion applies at sites that have undergone extensive excavations for several decades, such as Gortyn, Mitropoli, Eleutherna, Phaistos, Pseira, and Priniatikos Pyrgos. Of course, although extensive, the areas of excavations represent small percentages of the whole sites. Therefore, some sort of archaeological bias remains. However, notwithstanding archaeologists' lack of interest in Islamic-period layers, highly distinctive ceramics like those from Heraklion would probably have been recognized, or at least documented, if they existed at those excavation sites, as happened at Vyzari. By contrast, it is interesting to note that ceramics dating to the period of the Emirate, but belonging to Byzantine production, have been recorded at some of these sites. Most notably, Constantinopolitan Glazed White Ware II and Aegean and Marmara amphorae of the Types Sarachane 45-54 have been recorded at Priniatikos Pyrgos, Pseira, Siteia, and Gortyn.[64] This evidence would persuasively suggest continued commercial contacts with core territories of the Byzantine world, further undermining the grim assertion of the total disruption of economic activities in the Aegean due to the Muslim pirates of Crete.[65]

Arguments *ex silentio* are problematic. However, if considered creatively, it is still possible to make some interpretative contentions based on the corpus of evidence available. Thus, the consistent lack of association, outside Heraklion, between Islamic coins and other evidence of Islamic material culture, coupled with the evidence of Byzantine pottery at a number of the sites known across the island, call into question the identity of their inhabitants, suggesting the possibility that pre-existing local communities actually survived the Islamic conquest. Differently put, and subject to further validation, the interpretation of the range and distributive patterns of material evidence across the island seems to indicate that during the approximately 130 years of Islamic rule, the entire island was economically under the authority

62. See, for example, the survey of al-Andalus in: Alba Calzado, Miguel; Gutiérrez Lloret, Sonia. "Las Producciones de Transición al Mundo Islámico: el Problema del la Cerámica Paleoandalusí", *Cerámicas Hispanorromanas. Un Estado de la Cuestión*, Darío Bernal Casasola, Albert Ribera Lacomba, eds. Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz, Servicio de Publicaciones, 2008: 1-11, Illustration 10C.

63. Sidiropoulos, Kleantis; Vasiliadou, Magdaleni. "Ο Θησαυρός Μεσονησίου Ρεθύμνου της Συλλογής Σταθάτου", *Byzantium and the Arabs. Catalogue of the Exhibition*, Nicolaos Bonovas, Antigone Tzitzibassi, eds. Thessaloniki: Museum of Byzantine Culture, 2011: 40-46.

64. For an overview, see: Poulou, Natalia. "Τεκμήρια Υλικού Πολιτισμού…". Specifically for Priniatikos Pyrgos: Klontza-Jaklovaa, Vera. "History Hidden in Broken Pots or Broken Pots Hidden in History? The late Roman-early Byzantine Stratigraphy at Priniatikos Pyrgos (Crete)". *Studia Archaeologica Brunensia*, 20/2 (2015): 137-164.

65. Miles, George C. "Byzantium and the Arabs…".

of the Emirs (i.e. institutional Islamization), but the cultural Islamization of Crete was never achieved, or effectively (and willingly?) implemented in the countryside, at least to any significant extent. The ceramic evidence, in fact, would indicate that cultural Islamization remained a phenomenon limited to the capital of the Emirate, which appears to have remained almost the sole centre of the Muslim population on the island, along with some inland pockets (like the Amari Valley), never being widespread across the countryside.[66] This underscores the role of al-Handaq as the epicentre of the Muslim population in a capital-centric model whereby one large Islamic capital exists in a rural hinterland that, in the short term, does not seem to display any significant impact of social and cultural change.[67]

Textual sources contemporary with the period of the Emirate seem to corroborate this circumstance. Leo Deacon (d. 992), for example, is consistent throughout his "History" in epitomizing al-Handaq as "the town of the [Arab] Cretans", while no other urban centre ever appears to be held in Muslim hands.[68] Likewise, both Genesios (d. late 10th century) and al-Baladhuri (d.892), referring to the Islamic conquest in the 820s, wrote that "[Abu Hafs] built a city and, from there, ruled over the entire island".[69] Rather than figures of speech, these views could in fact be very much influenced by the perception of al-Handaq in their own times, as the hegemonic and ruling centre of the island. A further and most revealing textual source that seems to conceal the fact that pre-existing communities remained the majority in the Cretan countryside throughout the period of the Emirate is al-Masʿudi (d.956). In 916, he travelled to the East African port of Qanbalu, probably located on Pemba island, in the Zanzibar archipelago. Here, he noted that this island was mostly inhabited by a non-Muslim population, but it was ruled by a small Muslim community, including the royal family, who had arrived there around 750, and "had subjected its population in the same manner as the conquest of Crete".[70] According to Horton, this historical tradition refers to the al-Andalusian capture of Crete using naval forces in the 820s. However, if this was true, it would be quite striking that Crete, specifically, was taken as a reference, as by the early 10th century many other territories in the Islamic world had been conquered through naval warfare.[71] Instead, the extent to which this excerpt might bear testament to something more peculiar and unique to Crete is worth pondering; that is, al-Masʿudi's historical perception of this Emirate as a contemporary model of institutionalised coexistence between urban Muslim rulers and non-Muslim rural population.

66. This "particular residential and administrative model" was already clearly envisioned in Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. "Rites of Passage...": 301-302.

67. See: Insoll, Timothy. *Islam, Archaeology and History*…: 86.

68. Talbot, Alice; Sullivan, Denis. *The History of Leo the Deacon*…: 62-63, who make clear the semantic meaning of Cretans in this context as Arab Cretans.

69. Kaldellis, Anthony. *Genesios on the Reigns of the Emperors*. Sydney: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2006: 40; Christides, Vassilios. *The Conquest of Crete*…: 91.

70. Horton, Mark. "Early Islam on the East African coast", *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, Finbarr B. Flood, Gülru Necipoglu, eds. Hoboken: Wiley - Blackwell, 2017: 254.

71. See: Picard, Christophe. *Sea of the Caliphs*...

In practical terms, of course, Muslim economic and political interactions with pre-existing Christian communities varied in time and space, and depending on the particularities of the local social order in individual territories.[72] Regarding Crete, the evidence discussed above would suggest that little had changed in the daily lives of pre-existing communities, which continued to inhabit the Cretan countryside well after the Islamic conquest. As shown next, this model accords with the general patterns of Islamization that modern scholarship has been exploring in various regions in the orbit of the *Dar al-Islam* between the 8th-10th century, especially in rural contexts. The initial tendency of Muslim conquerors to congregate in capital and garrison cities, and maintain the pre-existing status quo of indigenous communities living in the countryside, has been recognized as a common pattern in contemporary Islamic states, such as Egypt, Syria-Palestine, Ifriqiya, and parts of al-Andalus, where pre-existing communities, especially Christians, constituted the majority of the rural population and indispensable sources of revenue.[73] The legislation of this period across the Islamic world, in fact, established that, subject to the payment of taxes and the fulfillment of fiscal obligations, private landholdings and cultivated lands should remain in the possession of their previous owners and those who cultivated them.[74] This position has been vividly expressed by Sijpesteijn, who has argued, based on papyrological sources, that throughout the first century after the conquest of Egypt (in some cases up to the 9th-10th century) "for most Egyptians living [in the countryside] under the new rule, the prevailing sense was one of continuity of daily economic and social life rather than rupture".[75] Certainly, as Sijpesteijn noted, this initial "non-interventionist approach" was partially due to the practical limitations of the new Muslim rulers, who were largely outnumbered in comparison with the pre-existing communities. Nevertheless, she adds, "the new rulers seem to have understood that sudden and violent rupture with the past would probably have been unnecessarily disruptive and inefficient".[76] Living in

72. For studies on landholding practices in the early Islamic period: Kennedy, Hugh. "Landholding and Law in the early Islamic State", *Diverging Paths? The Shapes of Power and Institutions in Medieval Christendom and Islam*, John Hudson, Ana Rodríguez, eds. Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2014: 159-181. Essays in: Delattre, Alain; Legendre, Marie; Sijpesteijn, Petra, eds. *Authority and Control in the Countryside: From Antiquity to Islam in the Mediterranean and Near East (Sixth–Tenth Century)*. Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2019.

73. Most recently (and respectively, based on the order in the text): Sijpesteijn, Petra. "Establishing Local Elite Authority in Egypt Through Arbitration and Mediation", *Transregional and Regional Elites. Connecting the Early Islamic Empire*, Hannah L. Hagemann, Stefan Heidemann, eds. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020: 387-406; Taxel, Itamar. "Early Islamic Palestine: Toward a More Fine-Tuned Recognition of Settlement Patterns and Land Uses in Town and Country". *Journal of Islamic Archaeology*, 5/2 (2018): 153–180; Fenwick, Corisande. *Early Islamic North Africa. A new perspective*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020: 129-145; Salinas, Elena; Montillas; Irene. "Material Culture Interactions between al-Andalus and the Aghlabids", *The Aghlabids and their Neighbours. Art and Material Culture in Ninth-Century North Africa*, Glaire D. Anderson, Corisande Fenwick, Mariam Rosser-Owen, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2017: 433.

74. The bibliography is extensive. For a general statement: Bernheimer, Teresa; Rippin, Aandrew. *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. London: Routledge, 2013: 102.

75. Sijpesteijn, Petra. *Shaping a Muslim State. The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013: 112.

76. Sijpesteijn, Petra. *Shaping a Muslim State*…: 84.

their garrison cities and capitals, therefore, it would seem that Muslim rulers were not interested in undermining the social order of pre-existing rural communities, as doing so would have been self-damaging. What mattered most was that local rural communities acknowledged their authority, paid taxes, and continued to be agriculturally productive. In return for this, they were entitled to stay on their land, to maintain their religious freedom, and to obtain guarantees of safety and inviolable protection.

Concerning the Islamic Emirate of Crete, similar legal documents, or material sources, such as lead seals, are not currently available, making it impossible to conclusively support any assumptions about the social order, religion, and administrative practices. As seen, however, forced conversions and confiscations of land were, de facto, contrary to the economic interests of the new Muslim rulers. Thus, why one would assume that the Christian/local population of Crete was treated differently than in these other territories of the Islamic world? This certainly, does not mean that a new utopian history of peaceful multiculturalism and tolerance should be rewritten. Piracy, slave trading, and sea raids launched from Crete into the Aegean throughout the period of the Emirate are historical events that have long shaped negative scholarly perceptions of this Islamic State. They are, however, in line with the booty economy and military necessities typical of the frontier zones of that period.[77] However, by shifting the focus to inland areas on the island, it would seem possible to argue that, in its mature form, the Islamic Emirate of Crete could be taken as an example of social equilibrium between Muslim rulers settled in their capital and pre-existing communities inhabiting the countryside, which still represented the bulk of the island's population, and formed an indispensable source of tax revenues and food. One can only wonder what would have happened if Crete had remained under Islamic authority for longer. Christides stresses the complete silence in textual sources of revolts by the Cretan local population against the Islamic rulers, either with regard to taxation or social conditions.[78] By way of contrast, in addition to the continuous Cretan rebellions documented against the foreign Venetian and Ottoman rule, uprisings against the imperial authority are documented even during the second Byzantine period, when, supposedly, the Cretans had finally succeeded in "fighting their way to liberation".[79]

77. For a definition of Mediterranean piracy in the 9th century: Horden, Peregrine; Purcell, Nicholas. *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000: 156-58. On episodes of piracy involving the Emirate of Crete: Christides, Vassilios. *The Conquest of Crete*…: 158-162. For contemporary examples of the Islamic booty economy launched from Sicily to Italy: Metcalfe, Alex. *The Muslims of Medieval Italy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009: 29.

78. Christides, Vassilios. *The Conquest of Crete*…: 158-162. This, of course, does not mean that revolts never happened.

79. For instance, during the reign of Alexios II Komnenos (1180-1183), Cretans are said to have rebelled against the imperial court by not paying taxes and expelling the central government's representatives and officials: Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. *Byzantine Crete*…: 83-900.

6. Phokas' *Reconquista* of Crete: an epochal event? Yes, but…!

Yes! Phokas' *Reconquista* of Crete was a historic, landmark event, whose outcome shaped the overall Mediterranean geopolitical setting and tilted the balance of power in favour of Byzantium. Conquering al-Handaq was an arduous and difficult task indeed, which was achieved over a long time (nine months), and only thanks to Phokas' military genius and ability to buoy the morale of his army. Far from discrediting the achievements of this illustrious general and future emperor, this article has attempted to tone down the portrayal of his *Reconquista* as an act of liberation of Crete from the repressive burden of the Islamic Emirate.

As early as the 860s, the whole of Crete appears to have been under the fiscal and political authority of the Emirs. However, by overturning previous prejudicial assumptions, it is argued that instead of perpetrating social oppression, the regime actually favoured social equilibrium between the bulk of incoming Muslims, who appear to have been concentrated in their capital, and pre-existing communities inhabiting the countryside, who seem to have remained mostly unaffected by the process of cultural Islamization. Such an apparently 'incomplete' process of cultural Islamization raises the question as to whether this was the result of the resilience and ability of pre-existing communities to adapt and maintain distinctive forms of material culture, or a consequence of the Muslim attitude to intervene as little as possible in the existing social order in rural areas, as long as authority was acknowledged and taxes paid. It was probably a combination of the two. Either way, it seems plausible to conclude that there never was an 'Islamic Crete' outside its capital, Heraklion/al-Handaq, whose walls and surroundings constituted a physical and ideological barrier inside the island. Certainly, some sort of armed control would have existed across Crete. However, as Tsougarakis pointed out, this peculiar *modus vivendi* can, at the same time explain, and be an explanation for, how Nikephoros Phokas recaptured the island: apart from the capital, the entire island fell into Byzantine hands almost immediately, suggesting that permanent Muslim military forces might have not been significant in the countryside.[80]

Speculations aside, Phokas' unsuccessful expedition launched in 964 to reconquer Sicily from Fatimid control featured a different outcome compared to that of the Cretan *Reconquista*. Like Crete, the Islamic (Aghlabid) conquest of Byzantine Sicily had begun in the 820s (827). Unlike Crete, however, the archaeological evidence shows that the process of cultural Islamization had been completed across the whole island by the mid-10th century, in both urban and rural contexts.[81] Even Phokas could do nothing in this case.

The significance of Phokas' *Reconquista* of Crete as a pivotal historical event is undeniable on a broader geopolitical level. More questionable is the extent to which

80. Tsougarakis, Dimitrios. "Rites of Passage…": 301-302.

81. The bibliography on Islamic Sicily is extensive. Most recently see Molinari, Alessandra. "Sicily...".

it really was the prodigious event of liberation of the island from the Muslim yoke depicted in textual sources, asserted in some modern historiography, and assumed in the popular imagination.