Recruiting Crews in the Fatimid Navy (909-1171)

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Abstract

Recruiting crews for the fleet was always problematic for medieval rulers. The Ismai'îlī Fatimids were no exception. In spite of every kind of adversity, from civil war to Sunni resistance and the crusades, they succeeded in building one of the most powerful navies of their time (tenth-twelfth centuries). The recruitment system, based mostly on financial attraction of crews and the organization of navies, partly explains both the success and the final failure of the Fatimids.

Keywords

Crew, Egypt, Fatimids, Fleet, Navy, North Africa, Syria, Slavs

The actions of fleets navigating under the white pavilion of the Fatimids made a significant impact on Mediterranean maritime history. However, the history of the men serving on the bridge of different ships remains largely unwritten.¹ The study of the recruitment of crews and their composition will open up a piece of this history.²

The Fatimid dynasty ruled over what were essentially two territories. From Ifriqiya first of all, between 909 and 969, in keeping with Fatimid religious doctrines, the aims of the dynasty were to take control of Egypt to march on Baghdad, and to drive out the Abbasids.³ From 969 on, the Fatimids conquered


² We shall consider the term “crew” in a general sense: all the men who were employed on a Fatimid ship, sailors, rowers, captains, soldiers, and so on.

Egypt as well as part of the provinces of Palestine and Syria and temporarily imposed their domination over the holy cities of the Hajj. In the face of difficulty, the Fatimids abandoned their imperialist designs on Baghdad. They concentrated more modestly on the maintenance of their domination in Egypt and on the coastal band of Syria and Palestine. They had to face a civil war (1062-1073) and then the arrival of the crusaders (1099), who deprived them of their eastern shores. In spite of all this, the Fatimids always had at their disposition an important and effective fleet for fighting off enemy navies, be they Muslim, Byzantine, or European. Depending on the particular period, their naval strategy and the organization of the fleet evolved. Essentially offensive from 909 until the conquest of the Syro-Palestinian littoral in the 990s, the fleet then assumed a more passive role. The Fatimids’ aggressive use of the fleet would only reappear after the fall of most of the Fatimid coastal cities into the hands of the crusaders between 1100 and 1110.

During its existence, the dynasty only rarely relied on the local Sunnite populations, though they were in the majority in both Ifriqiya and Egypt. Instead, the Fatimids sought faithful participants among the minority Christian and Jewish populations or among the multiple slaves and freedmen under Fatimid rule. This practice, as well as the religious differences and Fatimid fiscal pressure, occasioned some frustrations that could take the form of popular revolts that were more or less violent and difficult to bring under control.

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6 Jaffa is lost in 1099, Haifa in 1100, Arsuf and Caesarea in 1101, Acre in 1104, Tripoli in 1109, and Sidon and Beirut in 1110. Tyre fell in 1124, and Ascalon resisted until 1153.