Repurposed Narratives:

The Battle of Ṣiffīn and the Historical Memory of the Umayyad Dynasty

Introduction

The Battle of Ṣiffīn (36 AH/656 AD) seems, at first glance, a highly unlikely venue for pro-Umayyad discourse, but through an emerging sympathy towards the memory of the Umayyad dynasty, in the work of a handful of well-known Syrian Sunnī Arabic historians, that is precisely what it became. The Ṣiffīn story—the narrative of the famous battle on the banks of the Euphrates River, about midway between Baghdad and Damascus, between the Caliph ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān, then the governor of Syria, over the rightness of ʿAlī's continued reign—is an episode with a highly-charged potential to explore the critical dilemmas facing both the early and later Islamic communities. The early dilemmas saw the appearance of schisms; the later dilemmas saw those schisms develop and crystallize into genuinely sectarian identities within Islam. These sects—known today as Sunnī and Shīʿī (or Shīʿite)—have become distinct from each other largely based upon each sect's perspective on the proper succession to the Prophet Muḥammad, and an approximately 50-year sequence of events that resulted from that disagreement. It goes without saying that they were not always the ritualistically and theologically distinct entities they are today, but developed in opposition and in relation to each other over the course of a few centuries, becoming clearly distinguishable as sects by the fourth/tenth century. The battle of Ṣiffīn was an early climax in the first *fitna*, or period of inter-Muslim communal strife. The historians who wrote about Ṣiffīn—indeed, who wrote about all of the first *fitna*—were writing about the period of schism while facing threats from the emerging rival sectarian identities that were a direct result of it, as well as their variant perspectives on Islam's most vehemently debated historical period. The memory of the battle itself became a window into the development and evolution of Islamic political history, sectarianism, and religious thought.

What makes Ṣiffīn such a critical juncture is that it is remembered as the moment when the differences between those whose ideas about the legitimacy of the ruler would later make them Sunnīs and those whose ideas about the legitimacy (and proper identity) of the ruler would later make them Shīʿīs first found active expression. As an event of such deep political and religious importance, and with the well-understood difficulty of establishing a positively verifiable version of early Islamic historical events, the story of the battle of Ṣiffīn became fertile ground for sectarian polemicists and political theorists alike to employ as a historical example of whatever axe they wished to grind. For those (like the pro-ʿAlids examined in this article) who remembered the Umayyads as iniquitous, even evil, the Ṣiffīn story was an easy venue for vilifying Muʿāwiya (the founder of the Umayyad dynasty) and the Syrians. For the pro-ʿAlids, the fact that Ṣiffīn is a story that explains how, through their trickery and the foolish credulity of some of ʿAlī's "supporters," the Umayyads came to power, heightens for subsequent pre-modern historians the importance of the event in Islamic history and history-writing. For those (like the Syrian Sunnīs) who felt the Umayyads were unjustly or overly maligned by historical memory, creative license had to be taken to soften, modify, or omit the most unflattering episodes of the Ṣiffīn story.

Through comparative textual analysis and a literary historiographical engagement, this study traces a certain strand of Sunnī, pro-Umayyad (more accurately, pro-Syrian) sympathy that emerged in Arabic universal chronicles, with the battle of Ṣiffīn as a lens. Despite the general agreement about the course of the battle itself, the battle's role in the history of the early Islamic state develops in surprising ways. By comparing the various accounts with one another in an effort to trace the growth and development of that strand over time, particularly through Syrian Sunnī perspectives, this quintessentially Shīʿī story assumes a decidedly Sunnī flavor. The earlier sources are decidedly pro-ʿAlid (as are most extant early histories): Naṣr ibn Muzāhim al-Minqarī's (d. 212/827) *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn,* Ibn Aʿtham al-Kūfī's (d. 3rd/9th c.) *Kitāb al-Futūḥ,* al-Dīnawarī's (d. ca. 282/895) *al-Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl*, al-Yaʿqūbī's (d. 284/897) *Taʾrīkh,* al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923)*Taʾrīkh al-Rusul wa-al-Mulūk*, al-Masʿūdī's (d.345/956) *Murūj al-Dhahab,* and al-Maqdisī's (d. late 4th/10th c.) *Kitāb al-Badʿ wa-al-Taʾrīkh*. The (later) Syrian Sunnī sources are Ibn al-Athīr's (d. 630/1233) *al-Kāmil fī al-Taʾrīkh*, Ibn ʿAsākir's (d. 571/1176) *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, Ibn al-ʿAdīm's (d.660/1262) *Bughyat al-Ṭalab fī Taʾrīkh Ḥalab*, and Ibn Kathīr's (d. 774/1373) *Kitāb al-Bidāya wa-al-Nihāya.*

These specific historians have been chosen for three reasons. First, with the exception of *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn* (itself, as we shall see, critical as the "foundation text" for all the subsequent works), all the works are large-scale histories, and not limited to the Ṣiffīn story itself; this means that the Ṣiffīn story always appears not as a stand-alone unit, but always within a version of the wider early Islamic narrative. With this in mind, we can perceive not only how the changes that are made to the narrative affect the story of Ṣiffīn itself, but also see how the resulting changes in the *overall story* of Ṣiffīn fits the story differently into each historians' particular sectarian and regionally-biased schema of Islamic history. Second, these works demonstrate the chronological progression of the Ṣiffīn story from a fundamentally pro-ʿAlid episode of the first *fitna* to something approaching a pro-Umayyad apologetic. Finally, these works represent a broad spectrum of Arabic historiographical styles. As this article demonstrates, developments in historiographical style—that is, scholarly conventions relating to the proper compositional tools for the recording of history—were not insignificant in the development of the Ṣiffīn story in this pro-Sunnī direction. There is, of course, a great deal of opinion regarding the best ways to engage with Arabic texts from the early Islamic period; indeed, this question has been at the center of studies of early Islamic history since the dawn of the field. These disagreements, and the methodologies they engendered, are well documented, by (among others) Robinson[1] and Donner.[2] In the context of the present study, any concern with historical authenticity is a distraction; most directly applicable is the work of scholars such as Tayeb el-Hibri, Stefan Leder, and Jacob Lassner, who represent a broadly literary approach which reads these histories and the stories within them as if they were fiction, and attempts to determine, through the comparing of different accounts, the ways in which they were shaped as literary artifacts.[3] This more recent literary approach to the Arabic historiographical corpus is the most fruitful methodology—for

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[1] Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[2] Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Arabic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998).

[3] Some of these works include Tayeb el-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); also his *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: The Rashidun Caliphs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010; Stefan Leder, "The Literary Use of the Khabar: A Basic Form of Historical Writing," in A. Cameron and L.I. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East,* vol. 1: Problems in the Literary Source Material (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1992, pp. 277-315; Letizia Osti, "Tailors of stories: biographers and the lives of the *khabar*," in *Monde Arab,* no. 6, (2009), pp. 283-291; R. Stephen Humphreys, "Qurʾanic Myth and Narrative Structure," in F. M. Clover and R. S. Humphreys, eds., *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 271-290; Jacob Lassner, *The Shaping of ʿAbbāsid Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980)..

both the earlier, generally pro-ʿAlid sources and (especially) for the later pro-Sunnī sources—through which to approach the battle of Ṣiffīn for a number of reasons, preeminent among them the resonance the Ṣiffīn story has for the emergence and development of sectarian identities. This approach lends itself to the clarification of the literary shaping of historical memory—an activity that was precisely the goal for the Syrian historians who sought to reinterpret this critical event in order to rehabilitate posterity's image of the generally reviled, but natively Syrian, Umayyad dynasty. The reemergence of Damascus as a major cultural center under the Ayyubids and the Mamluks went hand-in-hand with a developing sympathetic presentation of Muʿāwiya and the Umayyads, and this allowed the Ṣiffīn story to develop into a rehabilitative episode for the Umayyad legacy.

Establishing the Foundation text: Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim and the Contours of the Ṣiffīn Story

In approaching the Ṣiffīn story as such a literary artifact, the first step in tracing its development is to recognize the fact that one text—Naṣr ibn Muzāhim al-Minqarī's[4] *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn—*exists as the foundation text for the Ṣiffīn story. The foundation text is a concept articulated used most recently by Antoine Borrut in his study of Umayyad historical memory, *Entre mémoir et pouvoir: L'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbasides*. Borrut uses the French word "vulgate" to describe this concept.

> Ultimately, the [base] material [ie, the vulgate text] elaborated and imposed what can basically be termed a framework, a grid through which to read Islamic history. All [subsequent] narratives, in effect, provide a reading based upon a limited number of key events, which are shared by all authors of every stripe; unfortunately, many other episodes, which would be of interest to the modern historian, are passed over in silence. More than a historical canon, this group of works forms a well-established historically canonical body of material. This framework does not rule out new interpretations [of the events described], but seeks to contain them in a field of fixed possibilities.[5]

Borrut's study focuses upon the culture of historical writing that existed in 2nd/8th century Syria, seeking to discern a history of the meaning of the very space of Syria. This description of the phenomenon of the foundation text in Islamic historical writing is directly applicable to *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn*. *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn* does indeed elaborate the framework of the course of the battle of Ṣiffīn for subsequent authors, who write in a variety of styles and with a variety of new interpretations. However, these later authors never describe an event at Ṣiffīn that was not first presented in *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn*, even if that event was presented in a different order or with different details in the earlier work. While the words may change from historian to historian (often, they do not), the framework of what "counts" as the Battle of Ṣiffīn remained that of Naṣr ibn Muzāhim.

A perusal of all the texts, discussions, and arguments surrounding the battle of Ṣiffīn leads to the incontrovertible conclusion that, despite the existence of at least one contemporary

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[4] See Carl Brockelmann, "Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim: der älteste Geschichtschreiber ser Schia," *Zeitschrift für Semitisk und verwandte Gebiete*, IV (1926), pp. 1ff.; Petersen, *ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya*, pp. 78 ff.; Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1952), p. 64; Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (*GAS*)(Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967), I, 313; Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur* (*GAL*), Supplementband I, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1937), p. 214.

[5] Antoine Borrut, *Entre mémoir et pouvoir: L'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbasides* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2011), pp. 102-3.

alternative in the form of Ibn Aʿtham al-Kūfī's *Kitāb al-Futūḥ,*[6] Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim's *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn* was the foundation text. It is likely that it was the source of choice for subsequent generations of historians because it adhered to the stylistic academic conventions of the time, whereas *Kitāb al-Futūḥ* did not. Composed entirely of *akhbār* (a recounting of an event or chain events which "is transmitted serially and orally, eventually finding its place in a written collection…self-contained and independent stories, which are attributed to earlier authorities"[7]) with *isnāds* (a chain of the names of the transmitters through whom the report has come to the author; used as a way of establishing authenticity) intact, often repeating the same story, and with a clear goal (among others) of recording for posterity as many of the details of the event as the compiler wished to transmit, *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn* is an *akhbārī* text *par excellence*. Since we do not possess Naṣr's work in its original form—only a modern scholarly recreation, reconstructed from direct citations in other works, most especially al-Dīnawarī and al-Ṭabarī—all we know for certain is that later sections, quoted from Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim, that are identical have a common source or are identical to each other. However, whether or not the words recorded for us as *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn* genuinely appeared in a book by that name (there is no compelling reason to assume that they do not), it is certain that from the time of al-Ṭabarī (at the latest) onward, the text identified as *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn,* in the form presented in this study, survived as the foundation text.

Although this study traces the Ṣiffīn story essentially from Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim onward, it is important to consider the sources upon which he relied to construct *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn,* and whose work is frequently cited by later historians directly. With a list of sources that include Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/774), ʿUmar ibn Saʿd[8] (d. ca. 180/796), ʿAwāna ibn al-Ḥakam al-Kalbī (d. 147/764 or 153/770), and Sayf ibn ʿUmar[9] (d. 180/796)—all of them from Iraq, where support for ʿAlī was traditionally strongest—it comes as no surprise that the Ṣiffīn story, and indeed much of the corpus of recorded early Islamic history, comes with a built-in pro-ʿAlīd viewpoint. Consider the installment of the Ṣiffīn story in which ʿAlī and his army arrive at the banks of the Euphrates, thirsty from marching, and are denied drink by Muʿāwiya and his men—a staple of the story that is an indelible part of the narrative—as an example of the style (note the *isnād* at the beginning) and overall perspective of Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim's *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn*:

> Naṣr—ʿUmar ibn Saʿd—Yūsuf ibn Yazīd—ʿAbd Allāh ibn Awf ibn Al-Aḥmar: …We made haste towards the Commander of the Faithful [ʿAlī] and informed him of this. He called Ṣaʿṣaʿa ibn Ṣūḥān and said, "Go to Muʿāwiya and say, "We have traveled this journey of ours, and I am loathe to fight you before pleading with you [for peace]. You have taken the initiative with your cavalry [by occupying the approach to the river], and thus you have warred against us before we warred against you. You have started this fight against us, but we will restrain ourselves until we call you to do what is right and place our arguments [for peace] before you." …Then Muʿāwiya said to his companions, "What do you think?" Al-Walīd ibn ʿUqba said, "Deny them the water, as they denied it to Ibn ʿAffān

[6] The critical version of Kitāb al-Futūḥ used here was published in Beirut, at Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, in 1914 and reprinted 1986.
[7] Robinson, *Islamic Historiography,* p. 16.
[8] In some secondary sources, including Petersen's *ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya*, his name is rendered as ʿUmar ibn Saʿīd, perhaps so as not to confuse him with ʿUmar ibn Saʿd, the leader of the force that killed al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī. In *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn* and elsewhere, his name is clearly rendered as ʿUmar ibn Saʿd.
[9] *GAS* I, p. 311-2; *GAL* Supplementband I, pp. 213-2.

> [ʿUthmān]. Blockade it for forty days, denying them the refreshment of the water and the nourishment of food. Kill them thirsty, may God damn them!" …Then al-Ashʿath returned, and cried out to the people: "Who wants water, and who wants to die? The appointed time is the dawn! I am headed for the water!"[10]

At this point, ʿAlī and his men achieve a victory in which they gain control of the water supply.

> Naṣr—Muḥammad ibn ʿUbayd Allāh—al-Jurjānī: ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ said,"O Muʿāwiya, what do you think of those people? Will they today deny you the water as you denied it to them yesterday? Do you think that you will now have to fight them for it, as they fought you for it?" [Muʿāwiya] said, "Enough of what has passed! What do you think?" He said, "I think that he will not deny you what you denied to him, and that those who fought with him upon the water will not deny it to you." Muʿāwiya responded with an angry retort.[11]

Echoing the story in which the Prophet Muḥammad seized the wells at the battle of Badr (2/625) and the story in which Muʿāwiya's son Yazīd denied water to ʿAlī's son Ḥusayn at Karbalāʾ (61/680), the battle by the water is an episode that has had little lasting sectarian impact; however, it carries a literary importance, in this case one that serves both to show the recurrence of the Umayyad grudge that the Prophet had prevented the Meccans from drinking at Badr[12] and to clarify further some of the key characters and their attributes. The purported villainy of Muʿāwiya in denying the water to the Iraqis is juxtaposed against ʿAlī's magnanimous release of the water after he had conquered it. This section shows such distinctions in character between the protagonist ʿAlī and the antagonist Muʿāwiya that it reads nearly melodramatically. Not only does ʿAlī distribute the water to both sides once he has conquered it, but he is also presented as trying to avoid armed conflict, even at such a late stage and in such dire circumstances; the Syrians, meanwhile, are presented as withholding the water with the intent of watching the Iraqis wither away of dehydration before slaughtering them.

Naṣr, as is common among *akhbārī* historians, includes a number of different versions of the story, including one where Muʿāwiya even goes so far as to order his men to release the path to the water so that ʿAlī and his men can drink, but is then disobeyed by some of his commanders. However, this version of the story goes out of style until the Syrian composers of the local biographical dictionaries revive it half a millennium later—and, naturally, it is the last version Naṣr presents, thereby implicitly granting it a lower standing than the other versions. Assuming they were using these earlier historians as sources, later, pro-ʿAlid or Shīʿī historians' like al-Masʿūdī's and al-Maqdisī's change in attribution of the order to bar the water from ʿAlī, from his commanders to Muʿāwiya himself, reflects a desire to cast Muʿāwiya himself in a more villainous role:

> ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ said to Muʿāwiya, "Alī will certainly not die thirsty, he and his ninety thousand men of Iraq, with their swords on their shoulders. Invite them to

[10] Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim, *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn,* pp. 160-6.
[11] Ibid., p. 186.
[12] See Tayeb El-Hibri, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: The Rashidun Caliphs,* p. 212.

> drink, and we will drink." Muʿāwiya said, "No, by God! They shall die thirsty, as ʿUthmān died."[13]

Compare this to the excerpt from *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn*—itself no Umayyad apologetic—in which al-Walīd ibn ʿUqba, an otherwise minor character, advocates letting ʿAlī and his army die of dehydration, while Muʿāwiya plays a more passive role. Muʿāwiya influence truly began to wax in the conflict with ʿAlī, and the subsequent widespread distaste for the Umayyad dynasty—particularly around the middle of the tenth century AD, when al-Masʿūdī lived and when Shīʿism was having its preeminent moment in Islamic history—undoubtedly focused the critical attentions of historians on its founding figure. There is, of course, plenty of villainy to go around for the Syrians, at least as far as these earlier historians, who are not as far chronologically removed from the events their histories purport to describe, are concerned. There is nonetheless a tendency among the historians writing in a more developed early ʿAbbasid milieu, like al-Masʿūdī and al-Maqdisī, to focus the villainous acts on Muʿāwiya (who was, of course, the leader of what they saw as an illegitimate party and the founder of an immoral dynasty) and ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, whose role in the story (particularly the later episodes of the story) is so prominent that his villainy could not be attributed to anyone else. This change in attribution, from a minor character to Muʿāwiya himself, of the loathsome initiative to make ʿAlī "die thirsty" may seem minor. However, it is precisely this kind of variation that makes the Ṣiffīn story's development fascinating: the story is both a window into the progression of prevailing sectarian and regional tastes as well as a tidy cross-section of evolving Arabic historiographical styles.

Sunnī and ʿAlid, *Akhbārī* and *Muʾarrikhī*: The Story Develops

The Sunnī-Shīʿī sectarian division obviously had a significant effect on the Ṣiffīn story moving forward, but the distinction in style was not insignificant, either. A*khbārī* historians like al-Yaʿqūbī and al-Ṭabarī relied heavily on Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim for the sections on Ṣiffīn they composed in their universal histories, and wrote in a similar style, most often with accounts that were identical to Naṣr (and, naturally, to each other). *Muʾarrikhī* writing, exemplified by al-Masʿūdī and al-Maqdisī, is distinguished from *akhbārī* both in terms of content and intention. The *akhbārī* historians sought to preserve the scholarly authenticity of the histories presented through the use of *akhbār* (sometimes multiple *akhbār* describing the same events) and *isnād*s (with what they considered to be trustworthy transmitters and a chronologically and geographically plausible chain of transmittance). *Muʾarrikhī* histories are more concerned with the nature of history and history-writing itself, and were less concerned with authenticity than they were with clarity of narrative and readability. As was the general trend with ninth- and tenth-century histories, these later books largely abandoned both the *khabar* and its obligatory *isnād* in favor a less "scholarly," but more readable, account. This trend towards greater readability meant that details could be appended to the story with relative impunity. This is not to imply that these men simply fabricated anecdotes; it is possible (given the fragmentary nature of the sources, indeed, it is likely) that many of the new details were gleaned from sources now lost to us. The consequence of the *muʾarrikhī*s' stylistic conventions or their access to additional sources is that the Ṣiffīn story suddenly explodes with detail around the middle of the tenth century, and the modern reader has no reliable way to determine the origins of these new details.

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[13] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, pp. 334-336.

Too much must not be made of this distinction between *akhbārī* and *muʾarrikhī* historical writing. The *akhbārī-muʾarrikhī* distinction is a very messy one—it attempts to describe a difference in the style of writing, and not a very complicated one at that. However, the categories are useful as convenient hermeneutic devices that can generally describe differences in these works. Developments in literary style are complex, difficult to categorize, and almost impossible to define or to place chronologically. While *akhbārī*-style writing tends to dominate historical approaches in early centuries, and while it gets more or less replaced by *muʾarrikhī*-style writing (and other styles, like biography) later on, there is no rigid "age of *akhbārī*s" that gives way to a rigid "age of *muʾarrikhī*s." In the context of this study, further, such distinctions are potentially especially problematic. Al-Dīnawarī, for example, writes without *akhbār* and without *isnād*s; however, his section on Ṣiffīn is otherwise nearly identical to excerpts lifted from Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim. On the other side of the sectarian coin, Ibn al-Athīr is categorized is in a similar situation: he writes a *muʾarrikhī*-style account, but is quite clearly dependent on al-Ṭabarī's *Taʾrīkh al-Rusul wa-al-Mulūk.* There are no major differences in style, aims, or historiographical approach between the two men; however, al-Ṭabarī would be categorized as an *akhbārī* by virtue of his inclusion of the *akhbārī* conventions of the *isnād* and the *khabar*, and Ibn al-Athīr as a *muʾarrikhī* because of his omission of them. The development of style has a general effect on the Ṣiffīn story, but it is certainly not uniform or consistent.

Of greater consequence to the Ṣiffīn story than the stylistic development is the emergence and development of rival sectarian identities, and the resulting degree of sectarian argumentativeness that makes its way into the work. This "argumentation" takes a number of forms, and is characterized by the appearance, in the later sources, of material that is not present in any of the earlier sources, the omission of specific material that was present, or alterations that change, in however minor a way, the evident meaning of events in the Ṣiffīn story. It is after the earlier historians, al-Yaqʿūbī and al-Ṭabarī especially, that the sectarian slant of the Ṣiffīn story veers in two directions: the extreme pro-ʿAlid or overtly Shīʿī perspectives of al-Masʿūdī and al-Maqdisī, contrasted against the (Syrian) Sunnī perspectives of Ibn ʿAsākir, Ibn al-ʿAdīm, Ibn al-Athīr, and Ibn Kathīr. It was not only sectarian—that is, Sunnī and Shīʿī—concerns that led some to present material that remembered the Umayyads with some sympathy; this point will be discussed in more detail at a later point. However, it goes without saying that *only* Sunnīs would be at all well-disposed to the Umayyads, because of the regard that Shīʿīs (and pro-ʿAlid Sunnīs) have for ʿAlī, whom the Umayyads opposed and fought, beginning with Ṣiffīn.

Since all of the earlier historians, who happened to be from Iraq, and also (therefore?) possessed of a pro-ʿAlid perspective, wrote in an *akhbārī* style, as was the convention of their time, their works share a number of stylistic characteristics as well as a general uniformity of perspective on the battle. This relative sameness is one of the most striking aspects of the variant early historical accounts of the Battle of Ṣiffīn. The obvious distaste for Muʿāwiya is not evidence of Shīʿī sympathy or belief, especially given attitudes towards the Umayyads (and pro-ʿAlid sentiment in general) in the ʿAbbasid context in which even the earliest of these historians, Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim, was writing. One army of the two in the battle, it should be borne in mind, was composed entirely of Umayyads and their supporters. It is a matter of great misfortune that no full Umayyad-era history of Ṣiffīn (or history in general, for that matter) is extant. One imagines that it would have much to say in disputing accounts of the battle by the water, of the plotting and calculating machinations of Muʿāwiya and ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, and of the relative cowardice of the Syrian camp in comparison with the bravura of ʿAlī and the Iraqis. It might also have reconsidered the righteousness of ʿAlī's cause; after all, for the Umayyads, it was not an unreasonable suspicion that ʿAlī was complicit in ʿUthmān's murder, and he was certainly sheltering his assassins; surely historians seeking favor from the Umayyad court would have emphasized these aspects of the history.

Lacking such a pro-Umayyad history, however, we are forced to rely upon what we have, and that is not insignificant; beyond the occasional story in al-Ṭabarī related on the authority of the tradent ʿAwāna ibn al-Ḥakam, who presented a view more sympathetic to the Umayyads than did his contemporaries (none of these stories are given in al-Ṭabarī's presentation of the key moments of Ṣiffīn), the later Syrian histories of Ibn al-Athīr, Ibn ʿAsākir, Ibn al-ʿAdīm, and Ibn Kathīr do indeed provide accounts that are somewhat pro-Umayyad, or at least sympathetic to the Umayyads, albeit in the thirteenth century AD at the earliest—essentially a post-ʿAbbasid context. Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim and the *akhbārī,* proto-Shīʿī or Shīʿī historians of Iraq clearly delighted in kicking the dead Umayyad horse; however, they also had a sectarian perspective they wished to reinforce. All the Iraqis' careful hand-wringing about the qualifications for the imamate can only be understood as addressing later concerns about political and sectarian legitimacy contemporary to *them*. It was also a way of bolstering ʿAlid claims. Al-Yaʿqūbī, for example, includes the following story of ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, later Muʿāwiya's chief negotiator, as he asks his sons for advice on which side to join:

> [ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ] called his two sons, Muḥammad and ʿAbd Allāh, and asked for their advice. ʿAbd Allāh said to him, "O Shaykh! Truly the Messenger of God died, and he was pleased with you; so, too, did Abū Bakr and ʿUmar die, pleased with you. Truly, if you wish to give your religious allegiance (*dīn*) to someone for the sake of advancement in this world, then give it to Muʿāwiya, and you will both lie down in hellfire." Then he said to Muḥammad, "What do you think?" He said, "This matter is happening one way or another. Be a leader in it before you are a henchman."[14]

Al-Yaʿqūbī's implication is that Muʿāwiya is not fit to lead because of his worldliness and immorality. Another damning passage, one that will be repeated by the pro-ʿAlid historians, appearing in Ibn Aʿtham al-Kūfī's *Kitāb al-Futūḥ,* seeks to disqualify Muʿāwiya from leadership on legalistic grounds:

> Abū Nūḥ came forward until he stopped between the two armies, and Dhū al-Kalāʿ went out to meet him. Then Abū Nūḥ said to him, "O Dhū al-Kalāʿ! In both of these two armies, there is nobody who will give you better advice than I [because we are kin]. Truly, Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān is in error, and has dragged you into error with him on a grand scale. One error is that he is one of the *ṭulaqāʾ*, to whom the Caliphate is forbidden. He is in error in that he demands your allegiance, and he leads you wrong when he takes the *bayʿa* from you. He is in error in his demand for blood revenge for ʿUthmān, and he has dragged you into error with him, for there is another who would take precedence over him in the demand for revenge for ʿUthmān's blood. He is in error that he has blamed ʿAlī for ʿUthmān's blood, and he has dragged you into error with him, for you believe him and assist him."[15]

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[14] Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh,* p. 183-4.
[15] Ibn Aʿtham, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, vol. 2., pp. 68-70.

One key point is that Muʿāwiya is one of the *ṭulaqāʾ*. The *ṭulaqāʾ* (the plural of *ṭalīq*) referred to the Meccan Qurashīs who, according to Islamic law, technically became the Prophet's lawful property when he conquered Mecca in 8/630. However, instead of retaining them as captives, the Prophet released them as freedman (*ṭulaqāʾ*), but they and their descendants were forbidden from leadership. Ibn Aʿtham also attacks Muʿāwiya's case for fighting ʿAlī, denouncing his claim to right of revenge for the murdered Caliph, ʿUthmān, by virtue of the fact that someone else (in this case, ʿUthmān's son, ʿAmr ibn ʿUthmān) is a closer relation with a better claim. Starting with Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim, pro-ʿAlid claims seemed indelible to the Ṣiffīn story.

Another reason for the general uniformity of views of the historians is the fact that they were copying and citing from one another (even if sometimes without explicit citation). It is a certainty that each man had access to the work of Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim or his sources, and had the option to emphasize, omit, rephrase or alter whatever he wished in the construction of his own historical account. The homogeneity of tone across the various accounts does not suggest that Ṣiffīn was not an important turning point in the construction of Islamic sectarian identity; rather, it suggests a conformity of historical concerns and ʿAbbasid era, anti-Umayyad perspective amongst these historians. However, the power of regimes and of sects waver, and new perspectives go hand-in-hand with new styles of recording history.

After the early ʿAbbasid period, the historiographical picture begins to change, and *muʾarrikhī*-style writing—long, unified narratives—became more prominent. These changes do not only apply to accounts of Ṣiffīn, of course, but to the great body of Islamic historical writing as a whole; such changes are detailed elsewhere.[16] Details—sometimes minutiae, sometimes large blocks of text—are appended to the narratives, with no clear indication of exactly where or how these details were discovered. Citation and *isnād*s follow the trend of ninth- and tenth-century Arabic historical writing and disappear almost completely, in favor of a less formally rigid, but much more readable, account. Commentary is interwoven with the recitation of names, locations, and numbers at an increasing rate. The *khabar,* while not disappearing completely, is mostly replaced by a longer-form narrative, constructed by "collecting, selecting and arranging the available *akhbār* according to their [that is, the compilers'] sound judgment and narrative scheme."[17] This was part of the larger trend away from monographs like *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn* and towards large composite works and grand historical compilations whose scale was universal, like al-Masʿūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab,* whose work, composed a mere half century after al-Yaʿqūbī's *Taʾrīkh,* was nonetheless quite different in style.

The historiographical trend during the times of the Shīʿī *muʾarrikhī* historians al-Masʿūdī and al-Maqdisī, Robinson states, "follow[s] patterns set during [the period ca. 730-830], and it is here that the origins of Islamic historiography seem to lie." He explains:

> If the earliest *akhbār* literature was dominated by relatively narrow, single-issue 'monographs' with short shelf-lives, it was the insight of [al-Masʿūdī and al-Maqdisī, among others] to recognize that for the ever-growing past to be recorded, it required more plastic forms of narrative. It is precisely this flexibility that explains why other schemes of historical narrative, such as *futūḥ* (works on

[16] See Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, esp. pp. 18-54; Fred M. Donner, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Survey* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994); Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins;* Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography;* Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs.*
[17] Ibid., p. 35.

> the great Islamic conquests), *manāqib* (works on the life and times of leading jurists), and *maqātil* (works on the deaths of revered figures, especially Shīʿite Imams) would be sidelined: they had had and would continue to have their champions, but they could not compete with synthetic chronography in its three principle forms [i.e., biography, prosopography and chronology].[18]

This change, from what has been classified as an *akhbārī* style to this *muʾarrikhī* style, was not entirely due to the simple invention of new material by writers who wrote accounts with *muʾarrikhī* characteristics—that is, the absence of *isnād*s and the omission of *akhbār* as the primary literary vehicle for the retelling of history in favor of the longer-form narrative. The addition of new material to the broadly-defined corpus of Islamic historical works had been in process for a long time. For example, a list of names of participants at Ṣiffīn that appeared in the Ṣiffīn story as early as the work of Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim was designed to honor notable descendants of the men named.[19] The *muʾarrikhī*-style historians sought to amalgamate these disparate and fragmented accounts into large and captivating narratives, uninterrupted by staccato *akhbār,* inconveniently conflicting accounts, or esoteric lists of names, and this was a process that involved a great deal of subtraction of source text. Sometimes, the construction of a new kind of narrative required not only subtraction and amalgamation, but also addition. With this in mind, it must be remembered that additions to narratives from earlier versions are not only explicable in terms of the extant works in which these additions first appear; those authors probably got them from somewhere. The fact that the authors were no longer constrained to cite their sources means simply that we cannot know when and where these new details first appeared (or to which details they had access and chose to exclude from their accounts). In this case, it is more than the absence of *isnād*s that unites the *muʾarrikhī*-style historians; it is a fundamental and explicit concern with the nature of history.

These historians continued to rely heavily on the foundation text, *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn,* as well as the *akhbārī* historians and the sources from whom the *akhbārīs* constructed their narratives (indeed, it is often impossible to tell which source is being used, an *akhbārī* or his sources). With al-Masʿūdī (d.345/956) and his *Murūj al-Dhahab* and al-Maqdisī (d. late 4th/10th c.) and his *Kitāb al-Badʾ wa-al-Taʾrīkh*, however, despite the difference in style relative to the *akhbārī*s, the general sectarian perspective of the story remains the same as the *akhbārī*; Muʿāwiya and the Syrians are the villains. If anything, the vitriol increases along with the level of detail. The following passage, with its condemnatory conclusion, begins al-Masʿūdī's description of the battle for the water:

> [Muʿāwiya] took up position on land that was wide and flat before the arrival of ʿAlī, a position that controlled any approach to the water, so that it would be difficult for ʿAlī to get to the water. This was a barbarous act which transgressed the rules of common decency to a great degree.[20]

Al-Masʿūdī and al-Maqdisī wrote in the first half of the tenth century, by which time the process in which the *akhbārī* style was evolving into the longer synthetic works of the mid-ninth century

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[18] Ibid., p. 39.
[19] See Hugh Kennedy, "From Oral Tradition to Written Record in Arabic Genealogy," *Arabica* 44 (1997), pp. 531-544.
[20] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, pp. 334-336.

was well underway.[21] Ibn al-Athīr wrote even later, in the thirteenth century, by which time that process was long-since complete; his work, too, was designed to present a single, flowing narrative, without *isnād*s and in which what he considered to be problematic passages from al-Ṭabarī's original were either omitted or glossed.[22] In Ibn al-Athīr's *al-Kāmil fī al-Taʾrīkh*, although the section presenting the Ṣiffīn story is essentially a *muʾarrikhī* style, *isnād*-free duplication of al-Ṭabarī's *Taʾrīkh al-Rusul wa-al-Mulūk*, some significant omissions sympathetic to Muʿāwiya are notable. What follows is one example, from Ibn al-Athīr's description of the battle for the water, in which Muʿāwiya is totally absent from (and thus less culpable for?) the decision to forbid ʿAlī's army access to the water.

> Al-Walīd ibn ʿUqba and ʿAbd Allāh ibn Saʿd said, "Deny them the water, as they denied it to Ibn ʿAffān. Kill them thirsty, may God damn them!" ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ said, "Release the way to the water, for then they will not thirst and you will be quenched, and though they may still fight you, it will not be for water, which is a life and death matter, so look to what is between you and God." Al-Walīd and ʿAbd Allāh ibn Saʿd retorted, angrily, "Deny them the water until nighttime, and they will not be able to stand it. If they cannot get it, they will go back, and their retreat will be their defeat. Deny them the water, and may God deny them water on the Day of Judgment!"[23]

However, Ibn al-Athīr did not exclusively omit material; he also included as much explanatory material, sympathetic to Muʿāwiya, that appeared in *akhbārī* sources as he could. Muʿāwiya's arguments rarely were given a voice; Ibn al-Athīr makes sure to elucidate Muʿāwiya's position at Ṣiffīn as clearly as he can.

> Muʿāwiya praised God, and then said [to ʿAlī's delegates], "You have called me to 'obedience and community.' As for the community to which you have called me, why, here it is. As for obedience to your master, we do not see it as right, for your master has killed our Caliph, divided our community, and denied us our rightful vengeance! Your master claims that he did not kill him, and we will accept this as long as he delivers those who killed ʿUthmān to us, so that we may kill them. Thus we answer you on the matter of 'obedience and community.'" Then Shabath ibn Ribʿī said, "Will it make you happy, O Muʿāwiya, that you will kill ʿAmmār?" He said, "What do you mean by this? If you mean Ibn Samiyya, I would kill him in revenge for Natīl, the slave of ʿUthmān's."[24]

The reference to ʿAmmār ibn Yāsir (also Ibn Samiyya) hearkens to a famous ḥadīth in which the Prophet said that "the rebel band" (*al-fīʿa al-bāghiya*) would kill ʿAmmār, one of the earliest Muslims and most venerated of the Companions of the Prophet. The story of the death of ʿAmmār ibn Yāsir appears in all versions of the Ṣiffīn story; the implication is usually that, since he died fighting for ʿAlī, those who killed him—namely, the Syrians under Muʿāwiya—were previewed as "rebels" by the Prophet. Muʿāwiya's defiant response is meant to imply that he

[21] Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, p. 41.
[22] Ibid., p. 99.
[23] Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-Taʾrīkh,* v. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1998), pp. 634-5.
[24] Ibid., pp. 641-2.

thinks he would be in his rights to kill ʿAmmār for revenge for the death of a slave of ʿUthmān's—an insulting remark, signifying that he views ʿAmmār's life as worth no more than that of a slave.

By moving away from the *khabar* as the primary device through which to relate historical events, seeking instead to construct a more unified picture of Islamic history, al-Masʿūdī and al-Maqdisī expanded, and possibly embellished, the Ṣiffīn story. Even given the distinctions in style, and the resulting distinction in the level of detail afforded descriptions of the events surrounding the battle of Ṣiffīn, al-Masʿūdī's and al-Maqdisī's perspectives on the battle and its use in the written histories, and its function in Islamic history, thus remained more or less constant from earlier iterations of the story. The amount of hostility towards Muʿāwiya and the Syrians, placed upon them because of the subsequent distaste for the dynasty they founded, varied, but the Ṣiffīn story's function within the wider story of Islam's origins and early development remained. Given the generally sympathetic view of ʿAlī's claims held by the majority of these authors, this sequence of events was undoubtedly a historical tragedy, and the Syrians (Umayyads) were its villains. Whatever differences existed among the different writers, it is clear that never did Ṣiffīn step outside the bounds of this role in Muslim narrative of early Islamic history until the twelfth century AD.

Furthermore, it must be understood that in order for the story to fulfill its role in early Islamic history, as defined by the worldviews of pro-ʿAlid and Shīʿī historians who wrote in both the *akhbārī* style and the *muʾarrikhī* style, the base behavior of the Umayyads could not be denied outright. It could be altered or shrunk, tempered or qualified, or even explained or understood, but it could never be defended. To suggest that the Syrians were sincere in their beliefs was perfectly fine, as it was to allude to their skills as temporal rulers; to suggest that they were somehow not in error would have undermined the narrative that the ʿAbbasid-era, Shīʿī or ʿAlid-sympathizing historians believed and strove to present in their works.

Ibn al-Athīr, for his part, contracted the Ṣiffīn story, and emphasized what he deemed to be appropriate source material in order to soften Muʿāwiya's villainy. He was part of a general trend in Syrian writing that sought to "rehabilitate" the Umayyad dynasty, and the role of Syria and Syrians in the early Islamic narrative.

Syrian Historians: Towards a Rehabilitation of the Umayyad Dynasty

When historians had a purpose in mind that demanded that such sympathies be tempered (if not disposed of), the Syrians could be defended; in such cases as are examined here, defending the Syrian actions was, indeed, *the* purpose of the Ṣiffīn component of the early Islamic narrative. Including Ibn al-Athīr's, some historical accounts thus began to appear which, though certainly not pro-Umayyad, begin to be at the very least sympathetic to the legitimacy of Muʿāwiya's complaints and ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ' tactics, and offer explanations of and excuses for their actions at Ṣiffīn and following it. As El-Hibri points out, this surprising attitude of sympathy for Muʿāwiya, while certainly not ubiquitous in ʿAbbasid sources, was in line with the slowly increasing (and ultimately relatively minor) trend towards pro-Umayyad writings that developed slightly later, which may have been motivated by anti-Shīʿī sentiment.[25] According to Charles Pellat, Muʿāwiya and the Umayyads became convenient symbols of opposition to ʿAlī, who was obviously the symbolic center of Shīʿī sectarian arguments and claims about the imamate. Thus, it was not out of love for Muʿāwiya, but rather hostility to emergent and developed Shīʿism, that

[25] Tayeb El-Hibri, "The Redemption of Umayyad Memory by the ʿAbbāsids," *IJMES* vol. 61, no. 4 (October, 2002), pp. 241-265.

this trend developed.[26] El-Hibri makes the point that the motives behind this "anomalous favorable representation" of the Umayyad dynasty in later ʿAbbasid sources tend to be ethical, rather than sectarian, in nature; he points out the common example of the pious Caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 101/720) as the one Umayyad Caliph extolled for his religious virtue.[27] One is hard pressed to find any explicit extolling of Umayyad religious virtues beyond those of ʿUmar II, a general appreciation for their Islamic architectural triumphs, such as the construction of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and their administrative skill. El-Hibri mentions Muʿāwiya as well, saying that "despite his detrimental role in the first *fitna,* [Muʿāwiya] continues to hold the keys for some important virtues—patience, forbearance (*ḥilm*), generosity, and political wisdom, to name but a few."[28] Such sympathetic ʿAbbasid characterization of the Umayyads was by no means limited to these examples; the Umayyads were highly (if not necessarily widely) praised, especially for their skill as statesmen and leaders. The milieu to which El-Hibri refers is that of "the third/late-ninth century attitude of the *jamāʿī-sunnī* religious circles, which tried to reshape much of the history of previous scholars and eminent political figures to fit the political and religious considerations of the post-Miḥna era," or, in other words, to "extend an image of orthodox [i.e., Sunnī orthodox] dominion to earlier eras."[29] El-Hibri mentions in particular a collection of dialogues covering all sorts of topics, from religion to governance, between Muʿāwiya and ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās (who also features in the Ṣiffīn story), in which the latter is clearly shown to be superior (no doubt for his historical importance to the ʿAbbāsid caliphs, who drew their legitimacy by their descent from him). This collection is among those texts sympathetic to Muʿāwiya explored by Aram Shahin;[30] Shahin points out that none of the works (all of which are monographs on Muʿāwiya) amounts to a biography of Muʿāwiya, but rather they seek to praise his merits or condemn his shortcomings. Shahin's study amply demonstrates that Muʿāwiya was a subject of intense interest and debate in his own right, irrespective of Ṣiffīn. The development of certain sympathies towards Muʿāwiya, often as a symbol of opposition to ʿAlī and the developing Shīʿī identity, would find expression in the Ṣiffīn story, as well.

As far as the Ṣiffīn story goes, the phenomenon of sympathy for the Umayyads seems to appear after the decline of ʿAbbasid power and the emergence of local sultanates under the caliph's nominal authority, although the praise for the Umayyads in general emerged somewhat earlier. While it should not be inferred that pro-Umayyad sentiment was a form of veiled (or not-so-veiled) criticism of a declining regime, it is perhaps more reasonable to conclude that the decline in ʿAbbasid power also meant a decline in ʿAbbasid patronage and ability to influence scholarly output, thus freeing later ninth- and tenth century historians to interpret the texts more creatively in order to suit them to their own personal historiographical, sectarian, or legal outlook. That freedom that allowed historians to create works sympathetic to Muʿāwiya was a two-sided coin, however; Shīʿīs or proto-Shīʿīs could also emphasize Muʿāwiya's villainy even

[26] Charles Pellat, "Le culte de Mu'āwiya au IIIe siècle de l'hégire," *Studia Islamica*, no. 6 (1956), p. 65.
[27] El-Hibri, "The Redemption of Umayyad Memory by the ʿAbbasids," p. 242. See also Chase F. Robinson, *ʿAbd al-Malik* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005); R. Stephen Humphreys, *Muʿawiya ibn Abi Sufyan* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); and see Nancy Khalek, "Early Islamic History Reimagined: The Biography of ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz," forthcoming in *Journal of African and Oriental Studies,* 2014, for a relevant discussion of ʿUmar II's treatment in *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq*. I am grateful to Dr. Khalek for sending me an advance copy of her article.
[28] Ibid., p. 242.
[29] Ibid., p. 255.
[30] Aram Shahin, "In Defense of Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān: Treatises and Monographs on Muʿāwiya from the 8th to the 16th Centuries," in Paul M. Cobb, ed., *The Lineaments of Islam: Studies in Honor of Fred M. Donner* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2012). Shahin includes a comprehensive bibliography of these works.

beyond what was present in the earlier bare-bones, *akhbārī* versions of the story, as was the case with al-Masʿūdī and al-Maqdisī.

For the *muʾarrikhī*-style writers Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr, and for Ibn ʿAsākir and Ibn al-ʿAdīm, writing in a different genre altogether, this dynamic between the presentation of the story of Ṣiffīn itself and its place in the written narrative shifted. This shift was a result of the emergence of Syrian historians, all of them fervent Sunnīs, who sought to change the implications of the established narrative of early Islamic history in general, including the Ṣiffīn story. The establishment of *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn* as the foundation text for the Ṣiffīn story, and the cooperation of such prominent historians as al-Ṭabarī, meant that the edifice of the Ṣiffīn story was unchangeable; however, with the construction of a small amount of scaffolding, the artifice could be renovated. Rather than have them play their traditional villainous role in the story, the Syrian historians sought to cast their ancestral countrymen as reasonable men who were fulfilling their function in God's plan, and who were not always as manifestly erroneous as they had been presented. The Syrians, incidentally, were almost certainly drawing—at least primarily—on the same line of history writing about Ṣiffīn that goes back to *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn*. Even if some early Syrian, pro-Umayyad sources may have survived long enough to be consulted, the large majority of those sources were poetry, letters, art, and architecture[31]—not the sort of sources that would be useful in reconstructing a pro-Umayyad retelling of the Ṣiffīn story. The similarity in word choice between all the Syrian historians on the one hand and al-Ṭabarī or Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim on the other is striking, and leaves little doubt that the Syrians were basing their narratives (when narrative material appeared at all, about which more presently) on the line of iterations of the Ṣiffīn story that have been the focus of this article.

In the 5th/11th century the composition of *Taʾrīkh Baghdād* by al-Khāṭib al-Baghdādī changed the face of Islamic historiography, popularizing a new genre: the local biographical dictionary. Drawing inspiration from *rijāl* literature, the biographical dictionary "might reasonably be defined as name lists, annotated (often generously) and arranged in accordance with the compilers' design and purpose."[32] By the 6th/12th century, and extending even further into the era of the Egyptian Mamlūk dynasty, the local biographical dictionary as a genre had proliferated, and two men—Ibn ʿAsākir and Ibn al-ʿAdīm—sought to do for Damascus and Aleppo, respectively, what al-Khāṭib al-Baghdādī had done for Baghdad, with the collections *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq* of Ibn ʿAsākir and *Bughyat al-Ṭalab fī Taʾrīkh Ḥalab* of Ibn al-ʿAdīm.[33] The style and structure of the biographical dictionary genre allowed them to include everything they might wish about any particular story; these "increasingly ambitious" historians composed works of truly staggering size, with Ibn ʿAsākir's *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq* originally containing as many as 16,000 individual entries.[34] These men were also uniquely positioned to offer an original take on the Ṣiffīn narrative. As Sunnī Syrians, writing about events that were important to Syrian (specifically Damascene and Aleppan) history, rather than the broader catchall of Islamic history, they had the opportunity to offer additions, new perspectives, and even some creative legal interpretation to help rehabilitate Umayyad history in order to help that demonized Syrian dynasty conform to a more "properly" Sunnī brand of historical orthodoxy.

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[31] For more on these sources, see Antoine Borrut and Paul M. Cobb, *Umayyad Legacies: Medieval Memories from Syria to Spain* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010), esp. pp. 3-6, and n. 7-16.
[32] Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, p. 68.
[33] Ibn al-Athīr, author of *al-Kāmil fi al-Taʾrīkh*, began a biographical dictionary entitled *Taʾrīkh Mawṣil* that was not completed. See Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, p. 154; Cf. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, p. 482.
[34] Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, p. 68.

A large part of what allowed and motivated first Ibn ʿAsākir and then, a generation later, Ibn al-ʿAdīm to construct such purposefully pro-Syrian historical reconsiderations was the reemergence of Damascus as an important political and cultural center as the Ayyūbid capital in the middle of the sixth/twelfth century. As such, it once again became a city of religious prestige and military and cultural importance. At the time of Ibn ʿAsākir's life, the Sunnī reaction to the Shīʿī Fāṭimid dynasty of Cairo, which had ruled Syria but was in the process of losing large chunks of it to the Crusaders, was fevered. For the first time since the reign of the Seljuks, the great majority of the city was Sunnī.[35] Once Nūr al-Dīn Zangī (who was Ibn ʿAsākir's patron) had emerged as the clear leader of Syria, persecution of Shīʿīs (including a massacre in 523/1129) began. Nūr al-Dīn "extended massive patronage to religious institutions and scholars, selected in accordance with [his] personal preferences regarding school of law, theological orientation, or attitude towards the study of philosophy and the 'ancient sciences'."[36] Ibn ʿAsākir was one of the men who enjoyed the benefits of arch-Sunnism during that time. His stated goal was to "preserve the memory of the city [of Damascus] and to protect this legacy from distortion," and to "extol the virtues (*faḍāʾil*)" of the locale, and his treatment of the early Islamic period must be understood in the context of that goal.[37]

However, it should be noted that, in the grand scheme of Syrian history, Ṣiffīn is an event of mediocre import, at best. Ibn ʿAsākir's section on Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān, for example, where one might expect to find a wealth of information about Ṣiffīn, more or less speeds through the battle in order to use the successes of his subsequent reign for the aforementioned purpose of rehabilitating Umayyad history. The universal histories examined in the study, of course, contained histories of the Umayyad dynasty, as well. However, in works that are organized annalistically, the focus is on *events*, and Ṣiffīn was an event of great importance to the Muslim community. In works that, by contrast, focus on individuals, like these local biographical dictionaries, the events exist in the text only insofar as they shape the life or the career of the individual being discussed. In Muʿāwiya's case, as is the case with many of the men listed who fought at Ṣiffīn, his presence at Ṣiffīn was noted, and perhaps briefly discussed, but it is not Ṣiffīn alone, or even primarily, that gives him his reputation; rather, it is his subsequent rule. Many of the references to Ṣiffīn in these books are merely statements that a given individual was with ʿAlī at Ṣiffīn, or witnessed the day of Ṣiffīn with Muʿāwiya, or was killed at Ṣiffīn, and so on, with no further narration or explanation. The shift from presenting the various accounts of history, as the *akhbārī* historians did, or presenting history as a unified, flowing narrative, as the *muʾarrikhī* historians did, to discussing history as a collection of men and their stories, is quite significant. So, too, is focusing the flow of history around a specific place; and the Ṣiffīn battlefield is remote from both Damascus and Aleppo, although still close enough to merit mentions in these works, as many inhabitants of those cities took part in the battle. Because of the different foci of these biographical dictionaries, therefore, Ṣiffīn, while remaining an

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[35] Louis Pouzet, *Damas au VII^e/XIII^e s. Vie et structures religieuses dans une métropole islamique* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq Sarl Éditeurs, 1988), p.23.

[36] Daniella Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria: Mosques, Cemeteries and Sermons under the Zangids and Ayyūbids (1146-1260)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2007), p. 9. On Ibn ʿAsākir and Nur al-Din, see Suleiman Mourad and James Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in the Crusader Period: Ibn ʿAsākir of Damascus (1105–1176) and His Age; with an edition and translation of Ibn ʿAsākir's The Forty Hadiths for Inciting Jihad* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2013).

[37] James E. Lindsay, "Ibn ʿAsākir, His *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq* and its Usefulness for Understanding Early Islamic History," in James E. Lindsay, ed., *Ibn ʿAsākir and Early Islamic History* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2001), pp. 10-11.

important crux of Islamic history, is not such an important crux for detailed treatment within these texts, whose scope and focus lay upon places and individuals over the course of several centuries. Without a narrative component in these works, the details of the Ṣiffīn story essentially became homeless, with reference to the battle most often relegated to one sentence references within appropriate biographical entries. There is thus very little treatment of the Ṣiffīn story in these texts; however, the rare exceptions—when one aspect or another of the battle is discussed—contain information that is indeed significant.

Although Ibn ʿAsākir is a much more preeminent figure in the history of Syrian historiography, the most relevant example of how the Ṣiffīn story could be used for the purpose of rehabilitation in the context of the biographical dictionary form belongs to Ibn al-ʿAdīm. Through his discussion of the death of ʿAmmār ibn Yāsir, the elderly and well-respected Companion of the Prophet who fought for ʿAlī at Ṣiffīn, he emphasizes that the Syrians were "rebels" against the rightful imamate of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib. This must be understood in the context of the following argument, repeated several times, which makes up the vast majority of Ibn al-ʿAdīm's discussion of Ṣiffīn:

> I read in the Book of Ṣiffīn which was compiled by Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Khālid al-Hāshimī,[38] known by the name of his mother, who said on the authority of …Abū Ṣādiq: The Messenger of God (God's prayers and peace be upon him) said that "three nations will come to Ṣiffīn. One nation will be in the right, not degraded by error in anything they believe. One nation will be in manifest error, into which no element of rightness will enter. The third nation will be stubborn in their statement that these are more correct than these, but these are the most correct. They are like sheep who will continue to lie down with their chests to the ground, sheep blinded by night and sent to pasture…. He said, "It was said to him: "O Messenger of God, where will be the believers on that day, will they be fighting?" He said, "Yes, and they will shake the earth strongly."[39]

He also includes the following:

> In the last chapter, we discussed the schism among the Muslims, and the schism among the Muslims was characterized by a split between the companions of ʿAlī and the companions of Muʿāwiya. In this story, the two parties came from his *umma*, and neither of them ever ceased to be within the *umma* of [Muḥammad] (may God's prayers and peace be upon him), nor did either lose the right to call themselves Muslims in this schism that occurred.[40]

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[38] This is the same Abū Jaʿfar mentioned by Eddé in "Les Sources de L'Histoire Omeyyade Dans L'œvre d'Ibn alʿAdīm." All that is known of him is his name.

[39] Ibn al-ʿAdīm, *Bughya*, vol. 1, p. 291. The nation "in the right" is, of course, ʿAlī's party; the nation "in error" is Muʿāwiya's; and the apostates are the Khawārij.

[40] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 294. Ibn al-ʿAdīm, does, however, single out the Khawārij as having become apostates at Ṣiffīn.

> ʿAbd al-Wāḥid ibn Abī ʿAwn said, "ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (may God be pleased with him) passed by the position of al-Ashtar on the day of Ṣiffīn, and he passed Ḥābis al-Yamānī, who was a servant of God. Al-Ashtar said, "O Commander of the Faithful, Ḥābis is with them, and I have always considered him a believer." Then ʿAlī said, "And he is a believer today."[41]
>
> Saʿd ibn Ibrāhīm said, "ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib went out that day with ʿAdī ibn Ḥātim al-Ṭāʾī, and they came upon one of his dead kinsmen who had been killed by one of ʿAlī's companions. ʿAdī said, "O woe for this one, for yesterday he was a Muslim and today he is a *kāfir*!" Then ʿAlī said, "No, he was a believer yesterday, and he remains a believer today."[42]

Ibn al-ʿAdīm's clear goal, at least in these passages, is to defend the Syrians against charges of apostasy. We may surmise from this that, although in general it was not suggested in previously examined works that Muʿāwiya had, by his error in opposing ʿAlī, effectively abandoned Islam and led his people into apostasy, somebody (probably an Shīʿī) had made such charges, and Ibn al-ʿAdīm felt compelled to respond. While it is also possible that Ibn al-ʿAdīm was echoing what had become the standard Sunnī view of the Companions of the Prophet—namely, that the Companions were righteous men, even if they fought against each other—Ibn al-ʿAdīm was concerned with defending the faithfulness of his countrymen to Islam, almost to the utter exclusion of other Ṣiffīn material, be it narrative or otherwise. It may reasonably be surmised that the question of who was in the right and who was in the wrong at Ṣiffīn had not been a subject of much debate, at least since the ʿAbbasids took power. Even so, Ibn al-ʿAdīm feels compelled to take up the defense of the Umayyad cause. Other than the aforementioned single-sentence references to Ṣiffīn, such discussions make up the entirety of Ibn al-ʿAdīm's treatment of the battle.[43]

None of the pro-ʿAlid historical sources examined in this study ever makes an explicit charge of apostasy against Muʿāwiya. Furthermore, if it was universally held that Muʿāwiya was a *bāghī,* a rebel, and not a *murtadd,* an apostate, Ibn al-ʿAdīm would likely not have chosen to spend such energy defending Muʿāwiya against a charge that had never been made. As Khaled Abou El Fadl points out, the intellectual debate over definitions of apostates, rebels and brigands was in full swing during Ibn al-ʿAdīm's lifetime. In the context of that debate, it is certain that the charge of apostasy against Muʿāwiya appeared somewhere, likely in Shīʿī-composed legal texts concerning the imamate, and Ibn al-ʿAdīm felt compelled to respond to it. The question that arises, then, is whether Ibn al-ʿAdīm's enterprise to defend the Syrians in his *Bughyat al-Ṭalab fī Taʾrīkh Ḥalab* was more motivated by his Syrianness or his fervent Sunnism. Both were obviously motivating factors. His orthodox Sunnism, however ardently believed, shaped the

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[41] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 295.

[42] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 298-9.

[43] A treatise of Ibn Taymiyya, *Suʾāl fī Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān Raḍiya Allāh ʿanh*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1979), explicitly defends Muʿāwiya against charges of apostasy, and concludes instead that Muʿāwiya was a *bāghi,* a rebel. In fact, the matter of baghy in Islamic law had developed slowly, and reached a critical point by the time Ibn al-ʿAdīm was active. For the development of the legal discussion surrounding the idea of rebellion, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 100-294; See also Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Fatāwa,* III: 456, 458.

contours of his argument about Muʿāwiya and Ṣiffīn. His Syrian pride-of-place spurred him to write the biographical dictionary focusing upon the history of Aleppo.

A Defense of Umayyad Double-dealing: Ibn Kathīr

Writing in the fourteenth century, however, Ibn Kathīr took Ibn al-ʿAdīm's defense of the Syrians at Ṣiffīn a step further. Writing stylistically like the *muʾarrikhīs,* he does not go so far as to criticize ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, his followers (always excepting, of course, those who became Khārijīs thereafter), or his cause; however, even the most immoral and deceitful acts of the Syrians are, at worst, placed in a positive light and, at best, defended outright as right and proper.

Without question, the most remarkable piece of text to date is the following section covering the arbitration negotiation between Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī and ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, as the two sides' appointed negotiators attempt to navigate a way forward for the community from the impasse in which it finds itself. It includes an explanation offered for ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ's deception of Abū Mūsā—an explanation for which there appears to be no precedent in other Arabic histories. The bulk of the selection is identical with the account in *Waqʿat Ṣiffīn,* with the obvious exception of the commentary at the very end.

> ʿAmr climbed up to the stage. He praised God and extolled him, and then he said, "Indeed, this one has just said what you have all heard, and deposed his master! I, likewise, depose him, just as he has. But I confirm my master, Muʿāwiya, for he is the *walī* of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, the claimant of his blood, and the most righteous of the people in his position!" For ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ had seen that the people would be left without an imam, and this situation would lead to a long period of corruption, exceeding the disagreements that the people had just experienced. He thus confirmed Muʿāwiya out of necessity, as *ijtiḥād* confirms and holds true. It is said that Abū Mūsā spoke to him uncouthly, and that ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ answered in kind.[44]

This event—in which ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ tricked Abū Mūsā into speaking first, and then denied their agreement after Abū Mūsā had announced they had agreed to depose ʿAlī from the office of the Caliph—had been the most universally derided episode at Ṣiffīn in all of the histories heretofore examined. As a Syrian, it is not surprising to see Ibn Kathīr expressing a soft spot for Muʿāwiya and his cause, as did Ibn al-Athīr, Ibn ʿAsākir and Ibn al-ʿAdīm, although he had, before this point, been careful to avoid expressing anything overt to that effect. Perhaps it is simply the Iraqi regionalism, Shīʿism, Shīʿī sympathy, or at the very least, pro-ʿAlidism, of most of the earlier Arab historians, but it is only here that ʿAmr's reneging on the agreement, publicly denouncing Abū Mūsā after tricking him into an agreement negotiated in poor faith, is not only explained or excused, but almost extolled, as Ibn Kathīr defends its legality. Ibn Kathīr is unambiguously correct, on one point, at least: in the intervening period, while the *shūrā* ("council") met to elect a new Caliph, the community would have been left leaderless, and thus with no path to salvation for those moments or years of leaderlessness. Such a situation, argues Ibn Kathīr, would have been worse than the troubles leading to Ṣiffīn, and could easily have led to something much worse.

We cannot tell whether Ibn Kathīr is indeed the first historian to promote his particular perspective about Ṣiffīn through the medium of historical writing, or whether he simply

[44] Ibid., p. 272.

borrowed directly from some missing piece of *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq* or the *Bughya* (both of which survive only with large lacunae), or even of another work, now lost. The answer to the question of Ibn Kathīr's original sources of the material sympathetic to Muʿāwiya is that, to some extent, it is not important whether the specific argument of Ibn Kathīr are his original thoughts or those of an almost-certainly recent, like-minded predecessor. The appearance of this argument in his work, however, certifies that by the time he wrote, the purpose of the Ṣiffīn story within this particular Syrian strain of Islamic historiography had fundamentally shifted, becoming a site for explicit apology for the Umayyad dynasty, even as the details of the story remained more or less consistent. When this particular argumentative strain developed is nowhere near as critical as the fact of its development.[45]

It is fascinating to see the most famous deception in early Islam praised for its legality and correctness within Islam, when it is otherwise universally derided. To most of the writers, this chicanery is the most inexcusable act committed by the Syrians at Ṣiffīn. The decision to bar ʿAlī and his companions from the waters of the Euphrates River, while certainly cynical and wicked, was ultimately nothing more than a military tactic and, from a literary standpoint, is presented a way to demonize Muʿāwiya and the Syrians early in the Ṣiffīn narrative. ʿAmr's deception of Abū Mūsā, on the other hand, had far-reaching consequences for the Islamic empire and its politics. The choice of a leader and the method of his election had been of paramount political and religious importance since the Prophet had died without a universally agreed-upon successor, and the election of the proper leader touched upon the very fate of the souls of every believing Muslim, who, without a proper imam, could not achieve salvation. ʿAmr's deception spelled the beginning of ʿAlī's political downfall and marked the beginning of the rise of Muʿāwiya's caliphate and the Umayyad dynasty's reign; one need look no further than the fact that ʿAlī was and is considered by posterity the very last of the *rāshidūn*, the rightly-guided caliphs (with the occasional exception of the pious Umayyad, ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz), to understand what a falling off Islamic posterity perceives in the transition to Muʿāwiya and the Umayyad dynasty. To see this moment not only *defended*, but actually *praised*, is extremely surprising. Ibn Kathīr does not condone deception or trickery; indeed, his response to the Syrian call for arbitration is as cynical as that of his anti-Umayyad predecessors. However, once that point was reached and the arbitration was established by the parties as the proper course of action, and once ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ and Abū Mūsā could come to no agreement regarding the Qurʾān's guidance in settling the matter, Ibn Kathīr argues that ʿAmr had no choice. To leave the community leaderless would have been a worse fate than continued fighting, and, he would argue, he was commanded to confirm Muʿāwiya lest the community be without a leader to be obeyed. ʿAlī had implicitly abdicated (or, at least, his appointed arbiter had actively caused him to abdicated against his wishes), and Muʿāwiya, to the minds of both ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ and Ibn Kathīr, was the only other choice available.

[45] The idea that "a bad imam is better than no imam" was already extant, even in Ḥadīth. It finds expression in the Creeds of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, whom Ibn Kathīr cited frequently, in the idea that the ruler, whether good or bad, should always be obeyed; since a view of individual leadership was not so prominent in Ibn Ḥanbal's creeds, and, since Sunnism was largely independent of the ruler—that is to say, the community was meant to unite around one scheme of law and belief, rather than one figure—clearly the Ḥanbalī perspective was that the identity and righteousness of the ruler were unimportant relative to his authority.

Conclusion

Ṣiffīn remains an important part of the story of the first *fitna* and the resulting emergence of theological schism within Islam. However, despite its evident use as a site for explicit argumentation on the subjects of the Umayyad legacy and the proper nature of the imamate, after Ibn Kathīr it was no longer used in this matter; nor is it used as such in modern times. When it comes to Ṣiffīn, it is possible that there is no reason left to pursue these arguments; the office of the imamate is no more, and even the most fervent Sunnīs tend to remember Umayyads as rulers who had exercised unjust authority. However, it is important to remember that in the story of Ṣiffīn, like many stories of Islamic history, and particularly during contentious times such as the first *fitna*, there is room for interpretation, and that interpretation on the part of historical writers can be a window into Islamic history and the development of Muslim sectarian identities, and that, while one narrative may come to dominate historical memory, there are always other versions, now lost or pushed aside, that may tell another story altogether.

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