

## Famous Last Words

### *The Maqātil of the Zubayrids in Medieval Islamic Histories*

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#### Abstract

Death scenes, or *maqātil*, were used by early Muslim historians to convey the meaning of lives, and to show the righteousness or sinfulness of the historical figures they were reporting about. Careful historians, such as al-ṬABARĪ or al-BALĀDHURĪ, eschewed the most obviously legendary tales, but seem to have exercised leniency when recounting death scenes. Using accounts of the deaths of 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and his brother Muṣ'ab b. al-Zubayr, I argue that the death scenes of these men reflect anxiety later Muslims felt about fighting undertaken by the *ṣahāba* and *tābi'ūn*, forebears whom later Sunnis took as exemplars even though they had participated in civil wars against other Sunni figures. Both of these men died fighting for a cause that they likely deemed righteous, which raised the question of martyrdom. Could they be considered martyrs when they had died fighting other Muslims? Their death scenes indicate that these men at least died nobly, heroically fighting for their cause. Whatever their status in the next life, in their death scenes, they are given voices, posthumous though they might be, with which to preserve their memories in an edifying and morally uplifting fashion, and to hint at their ultimate fates.

#### Introduction

The famous 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century historian, IBN AL-ATHĪR, defended the usefulness of historical writing by arguing that the lessons of history encourage intelligent people to forbear in the face of adversity, to take consolation in knowing of the trials suffered by others, and to realize that life and fate in this lower world are arbitrary:

As to the usefulness of history for the other world... truly intelligent persons who reflect about the lessons of history will notice that the world turns its people upside down and plays havoc with its most prominent inhabitants. It takes away their lives and treasures... and neither the rich nor the poor are safe from its misfortunes.... Furthermore, the study of history leads to the acquisition of two very good qualities, forbearance and the habit of taking consolation in the examples of others (*al-ta'assī*).<sup>1</sup>

Although he wrote in the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., IBN AL-ATHĪR's comments reflect perceptions of history that long predate him. In the early histories of such ninth- and

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1 The translation here is that of Franz Rosenthal except for the definition of *al-ta'assī*. ROSENTHAL 1968: 299-300; IBN AL-ATHĪR, *Kāmil*, i: 8.

tenth-century Muslim historians as al-ṬABARĪ and al-BALĀDHURĪ, internal evidence suggests that histories were already seen in their time, if not well before, as repositories of lessons (*ibar*)—lessons about temptation and power, heroism and nobility, righteousness and piety. In the case of troubling junctures in the early Islamic past, such as civil wars, historical accounts also functioned to clarify the meaning of that bewildering past.

Some kinds of reports, however, were more useful than others in serving these purposes. Dramatic death scenes, *maqātil* (sing. *maqtal*), in particular allowed historians and transmitters to portray character, to edify and inspire noble values, and to treat difficult questions that the memory of the past brought up.<sup>2</sup> *Maqātil*, it is argued here, seem to have been considered a type of historical account in which creative transmission (or embellishment) was seen as deserving a relatively free hand. In general, serious historians such as al-ṬABARĪ, al-BALĀDHURĪ or IBN AL-ATHĪR avoided accounts that were too obviously marked by elaboration, such as patently symbolic reports about men who had, as children, preferred to drink blood over milk. *Maqātil* however, were likely held to a slightly different standard: their function in histories was to sum up lives, to illuminate the values and the causes for which men and women died, and to provide inspiration through accounts of exemplary suffering. In some cases, they also did more than this; death scenes—the Arabic term *maqātil* means “scenes (or moments) of killing”—also shed light on two key issues in the historical memory of the early Islamic period: martyrdom and the problem of the righteousness of forebears who took part in civil wars.

### The Larger Context: Death Scenes in Literature and Historiography

The creative embellishment of accounts about how famous forebears faced death is not unique to the Islamic tradition; literary representations of dramatic deaths, especially when those deaths were defined as martyrdom, have a long and distinguished history in Christianity, Judaism, and other traditions. Muslim transmitters’ accounts of noble deaths were doubtless affected by the literary traditions of the late antique world in which they were transmitted, just as Muslim concepts of martyrdom were.<sup>3</sup> Christian martyrologies functioned not only to memorialize those who had died for the sake of the faith but also to inspire potential believers, and to create a sense in readers of a “community of suffering,” a sense of identity bolstered by accounts of suffering and self-sacrifice for God, for the

2 On *maqātil* as a genre of historical writing, see GÜNTHER 1994: 192-212 and GÜNTHER 1991. Julie Scott MEISAMI dedicated an article to the account given by the eleventh-century Persian historian, Bayhaqī, of the execution of Hasanak in 422/ 1031. MEISAMI asks rhetorically, “Is this the way things really happened? ... Bayhaqī’s purpose is not merely to deliver “the facts” ...but to present [Hasanak] as an emblematic victim of injustice, and thus a universal type.” MEISAMI 1995: 360; Tayeb El-Hibri noted the use of death scenes to portray “a central human and political tragedy where the actor’s fall becomes his only salvation from the moral and political disorder generated in the pursuit of power.” EL-HIBRI 1999: 94.

3 SZYSKA 2004: 36. Angelika Neuwirth argues that “the Islamization of the martyrdom concept took place only during Umayyad rule ... Islam in that era integrated elements of Christian religious culture and theology on a massive scale.” NEUWIRTH 2004: 262. Thomas Sizgorich has argued that Muslims incorporated “a late antique koiné of signs, symbols, and narratives they encountered” in the lands they settled after the Islamic conquests. SIZGORICH 2009: 147-164, 276, *et passim*.

Truth.<sup>4</sup> Authors of Christian martyrologies used “stylized, literary representation of the interrogation, torture and death” of martyrs to convey the message that these accounts were accounts about how the battle between good and evil, righteousness and temptation played out in the final moments of human lives.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, *maqātil* in Islamic histories are also accounts about the battle between good and evil, or rather, about the human battle to attempt to remain righteous while facing not only certain failure in this lower world but also the inscrutability of God’s will.<sup>6</sup> But death scenes in the Sunni historical tradition differ sharply from Christian martyrologies in that the men (and on occasion women) portrayed by early Sunni Muslim historians were not always clearly defined as martyrs. The early Sunni historical tradition developed in a milieu that was colored not only by late antique Christian martyrological traditions, but also by the accounts of the rival Khārijī and early Shīʿī historical traditions; like the Christian martyrological tradition, the Khārijīs and early Shīʿīs could unabashedly frame the deaths of those who had fallen in battle against “impious” Muslim opponents as martyrs’ deaths.

For Sunni historians (and their Sunni audiences), however, a tension existed between several core religious commitments: respect for Prophetic ḥadīth that forbade participation in intra-communal strife, reverence accorded to the Prophet’s Companions and their Successors, and the unexpurgated memory that some of the most famous of those Companions and Successors had fought one another unto death. Khārijī and Shīʿī historical memory was not dogged by this contradiction between theology and history, so the deaths of their respective forebears could be freely represented as martyrdom.

For Sunnis, the early Muslims who had died while fighting (or resisting) pagans or non-Muslims for the sake of Islam (*fī sabīl Allāh*), could easily be deemed martyrs for the faith. Illustrious early Muslims who fought for the sake of righteousness (*al-ḥaqq*) against other Muslims, however, were more problematic. The question of whether they were sinners or martyrs, whether they had transgressed or had been righteous, remained open to debate.<sup>7</sup> If esteemed forebears had been killed while fighting against other Muslims, even if they had done so for an apparently just cause, they could not easily be deemed martyrs, since to kill another Muslim was forbidden by the Qurʾān and the Sunni ḥadīth literature: it was a sin, the punishment for which was consignment to hell.<sup>8</sup>

Some verses of the Qurʾān seem rather unequivocal on the matter, such as the verses found in Sūrat al-Nisāʾ: “It is unlawful for a believer to kill another believer except by accident... He who kills a Believer by design shall burn in Hell forever. He shall incur the wrath of God, who will lay His curse upon him and prepare for him a woeful punishment.” (4: 94, 97-8.) Other Qurʾānic verses are less clear: Sūrat al-Ḥujarāt (9: 9-10) instructs Muslims to solve intra-communal conflicts, but if one group of Muslims transgresses the rights of others, they should be fought: “If two parties from among the Believers fight each other, then make peace between them. But if one of them transgresses against the other, then fight

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4 PANNEWICK 2004a: 9.

5 BROCK / HARVEY 1987: 14.

6 As evinced in the inclusion of *maqātil* in Islamic literature that treats the issue of forbearing in the face of hardship and tribulations, such as ABŪ ʿL-ʿARAB al-Tamīmī’s *Kitāb al-miḥan*, “*Book of Trials*.”

7 On this question, see: ABOU EL-FADL 2001, KOHLBERG 1997 and KOHLBERG 1997a.

8 For representative *ahadīth* on this problem, a good selection, conservative but full, is that of Muslim: Muslim b. al-ḤAJJĀJ, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ix: 262 (*kitāb al-fitan wa-ashrāt al-sāʿah*).

against the party that is transgressing (*al-fi'a al-bāghiya*) until they comply with God's command..."<sup>9</sup> The problem faced by historians, jurists, exegetes, and theologians was that the Qur'an did not expressly address the question of Muslims fighting against the oppression and injustice of other Muslims who happened to command far superior forces.<sup>10</sup>

The Sunni ḥadīth literature on the issue of intra-communal strife was less open to interpretation than were the Qur'anic verses: many ḥadīth reports specifically forbade intra-communal strife, treating it under the rubric of *fitan*. The Prophet is reported to have said, "If two Muslims attack each other with swords, they are both bound for Hell." It was said [to him], "That is for the killer, but what about the one killed?" He replied, "He had intended to kill his opponent."<sup>11</sup> In general, the ḥadīth literature, which often reflects post-Qur'anic developments of the first and second Islamic centuries, counsels Muslims to avoid conflict, even when their Muslim leaders commit injustices. For historians, the trouble with the quietism promoted by most *aḥādīth*, and by nearly all later Sunni credal statements, was that it ran directly counter to the distinctly activist example of many important Companions and their Successors.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the question of which individuals among those killed in intra-communal strife during the first century were martyrs rather than sinners became a thorny issue relatively early in the young Islamic community's history: the famous case of Prophet's grandson, al-Ḥusayn, having been killed in an attempt to rebel against other Muslims, was especially problematic: was he a rebel or a martyr? The fact that the place of his death was memorialized not long after his death by the Tawwābūn—who visited his gravesite before going to face the likelihood of meeting their own deaths in battle to avenge his killing—indicates that al-Ḥusayn was already being understood as a martyr-figure by some Muslims of his generation. Was it proper that this grandson of the Prophet, famed for his piety, should be deemed a sinner by Sunnis?<sup>13</sup>

9 The identity of this group, "al-fi'a al-bāghiya," since clear Qur'anic leave is given to fight it, has naturally occasioned substantial debate. Any imperfect Muslim group with power could be identified as "transgressing" the rights of another.

10 As noted by ABOU EL-FADL 2001: 38.

11 The Prophet is similarly reported to have said, "Whoever dislikes something that his leader has done, let him be forbearing, for whoever departs even a hand's span from authority will die as a pagan." (*Man kariha min amīrihi shay'an, fa-l-yaṣbur, fa-innahū man kharaja min-a 'l-sulṭān' shibr'an māta mītat'an jāhiliyyah*). Variations on *aḥādīth* like these can be found in all major Sunni *ḥadīth* collections, in the books on "fitan," and under such categories as "diyāt," and "qu'ūd." These versions are from al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* (*kitāb al-fitan, bāb 'idhā 'l-taqā 'l-muslimāni bi-sayfayhimā*). Jurists made reference not only to these *aḥādīth*, but also to biographies of the Prophet, and were forced by theological disputes about the problem of Companions and Successors having killed each other to elaborate the divine law in subtle ways. For a brief overview, see *EP* s.v. "Ḳatī" (Joseph SCHACHT).

12 ABOU EL-FADL observed that "some jurists went so far as to say that the sole reason God made the Companions fight each other was to teach Muslims the law of rebellion." ABOU EL-FADL 2001: 44. This interpretation of the problematic early Islamic past gives purpose to the conflicts and explains how they expressed God's will.

13 The *maqṭal* of al-Ḥusayn and those killed with him, central to Shī'ī piety, has received a good deal of scholarly attention particularly in its form as *ta'ziya* play, from the classic study, Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (AYOUB 1978) through AGHAIE 2004 and PINAULT 2001. For a perceptive treatment of this literature and the topic, see PANNEWICK 2004b.

Reported dreams could resolve the problem of righteous forbears who were killed while fighting against other Muslims. As Leah KINBERG has pointed out, in medieval Islamic societies, the idea that “anyone who has died may appear in a dream and supply sound guidance” was widespread.<sup>14</sup> Dreams were understood to be windows onto a reality not accessible to mundane sensory perception; answers given by the dead in dreams were understood to reflect the truth.

One dream account that seems to have been aimed at solving the problem of upright Muslims who were killed while participating in intra-communal strife created an obscure category between martyr and sinner. IBN SA‘D transmitted an account in which Kuthayyir b. Aflah was seen in a dream. Kuthayyir was a Medinan who had been killed during the Battle of al-Ḥarra, at which the Umayyads had defeated the Medinans then plundered their homes and raped their women, before extracting humiliating oaths of loyalty from the surviving men. The dreamer asked Kuthayyir whether or not he was a martyr—and presumably, in the minds of his audience, the deceased Kuthayyir would have already known the answer to the question:

While I was asleep, I saw Kuthayyir b. Aflah in a dream—he had died at the Battle of al-Ḥarra. I realized that he was dead and that I was dreaming.... I called him by his name, and he answered me. I said, “Weren’t you killed?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “What did you do?” (*Mādhā šana‘tum?*) He said, “Good” (*khayr*). I asked, “Are you martyrs?” He said, “No, if Muslims meet in battle and a group of them are killed, they are not martyrs. But we are *nudabā’*.”<sup>15</sup>

It is unclear exactly what was meant by *nudabā’*,<sup>16</sup> the root gives meanings of “being forgiven,” “praising and bewailing the dead,” as well as “appointing substitutes, deputies or delegates.” The context makes it clear, however, that it was intended to indicate something reputable, below martyrs but well above sinners in status.<sup>16</sup>

Reported dreams supplied one form of evidence that could be used to solve the problem of early Muslims who fought other Muslims for the sake of righteousness. Reported speech and actions in death scenes provided another form, as is clear in the cases of the *maqātīl* of two brothers, Muṣ‘ab and ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr.<sup>17</sup> The same kinds of observations made

14 KINBERG 1993: 288. See also KINBERG 1986. Michael Cooperson notes that “evidentiary dreams” were an important form of proof, according to “notions of determinative evidence current among transmitters of polemical narrative.” COOPERSON 2000: 129.

15 Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, v: 228 (*tarjamat Kuthayyir b. Aflah*).

16 LANE 1863: s.v. *nūn dāl bā’*. In IBN MANZŪR’s *Lisān al-‘Arab*, a ḥadīth is cited: *intadaba allāhu li-man yakhruju fi sabīlihi ayy ajābahu ilā ghufṛānihi*. Here *intadaba* means “to grant forgiveness.” S.v. *nūn dāl bā’*.

17 For the *maqātīl* scenes of both Zubayrids, I rely here primarily on the full versions given by al-ṬABARĪ and al-BALĀDHURĪ, with occasional reference to other historians’ accounts. For the *maqātīl* of Muṣ‘ab: al-ṬABARĪ, *Ta’rīkh* (ed. Ibrahim), vi: 151-62 (= ed. De Goeje, *Annales*, ser. ii, 804-813); corresponding English translation, al-ṬABARĪ, *Victory of the Marwānids*, 177-188 (my translations of cited passages make use of Fishbein’s translation, but also differ from it); al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb* (ed. Goitein), v, 331-355. Parallel accounts are found in: IBN AL-ATHĪR, *Kāmil*, iv: 323-336; al-DĪNAWARĪ, *al-Akḥbār al-Ṭīwal*, 311-315; Ibn A‘tham al-KŪFĪ, *al-Futūḥ*, vi: 260-270; al-YA‘QŪBĪ, *Ta’rīkh*, ii: 264-66; Khalīfa b. KHAYYĀṬ, *Ta’rīkh*, 205-206; al-MAS‘ŪDĪ, *Murūj*, iii: 112-117; IBN KATHĪR, *Bidāya*, viii: 29-302 (*sub*

here about the Zubayrids could be made about the *maqātil* of yet more famous fallen Companions and Successors, such as ‘Uthmān, al-Zubayr, and others, although in the cases of the individuals such as ‘Alī and al-Ḥusayn, who were given the status of martyred imams by the Shī‘īs, different considerations also apply. Others, such as Muslim b. ‘Aqīl, were also the beneficiaries of dramatic, heroic death scenes that functioned to prove the righteousness of their failed endeavors.<sup>18</sup>

*Maqātil* also furnished historians with rhetorical tools for establishing the reprehensible nature of some historical figures. The *maqṭal* of al-Mukhtār given by al-ṬABARĪ, for example, includes remarks made by him that “show” that he was motivated by ambition, not by religious commitment. Although al-Mukhtār was generally reviled in Sunni historiography, in the specific case of Ibn A‘tham al-KŪFĪ’s history, *al-Futūḥ*, the *maqṭal* of al-Mukhtār is redemptive, dramatic and laudatory: al-Mukhtār’s last words tell us that he was content to die after having achieved his noble aim of avenging the blood of the members of *ahl al-bayt* killed at Karbalā’.<sup>19</sup>

### The Maqṭal of Muṣ‘ab b. al-Zubayr

Some years after ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr won recognition as caliph, he appointed his handsome, brave and generous younger brother Muṣ‘ab to the governorship of Iraq (c. 687 C.E.).<sup>20</sup> Shortly thereafter, the young Muṣ‘ab led an army against his most important competitor for power in Iraq, al-Mukhtār, whom he vanquished and killed, thereby consolidating Zubayrid power in Iraq.<sup>21</sup> Zubayrid rule was challenged by many rebellions in the next few years but must have initially seemed at least as likely to succeed as did Umayyad rule. However, in 72/691 the Umayyad caliph, ‘Abd al-Malik, personally led an army against Muṣ‘ab and his Zubayrid forces in an attempt to dismantle the Zubayrid state and consolidate Umayyad power.<sup>22</sup>

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*anno* 71); al-IṢFAHĀNĪ, *Aghānī*, xix: 84-92 “*maqṭal* Muṣ‘ab b. al-Zubayr.” The year under which most historians treated Muṣ‘ab’s *maqṭal* is 72 A.H.

18 Among the most moving accounts of the *maqṭal* of Muslim b. ‘Aqīl, the cousin of al-Ḥusayn sent to Kufa to prepare for al-Ḥusayn’s arrival, is that given by Ibn A‘tham al-KŪFĪ: al-KŪFĪ, *Futūḥ*, v: 92-103.

19 al-KŪFĪ, *Futūḥ*, vi: 190-191, 196-8

20 The appointment is reported in al-ṬABARĪ, *Annales*, ser. ii, 716-717; al-YA‘QŪBĪ, *Ta‘rīkh*, ii: 264; al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 234, 273; IBN AL-ATHĪR, *Kāmil*, iv: 266-267. Muṣ‘ab’s generosity, handsome face, and humility are nearly universally remarked upon in the histories. See al-Balādhurī’s short *tarjama* of Muṣ‘ab: al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 59.

21 AL-ṬABARĪ, *Annales*, ser. ii, 718-750, *sub anno* 67; al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 260-273 (under “*maqṭal* al-Mukhtār”); IBN AL-ATHĪR, *Kāmil*, iv: 267-72. Ibn Kathīr, in his *tarjama* of Muṣ‘ab, discussed the problem of Muṣ‘ab’s having killed all of al-Mukhtār’s supporters after having given them a promise of safe passage. He cited the Quranic verse, Sūrat al-Nisā’, v. 93, in which the punishment for killing a fellow Muslim is spelled out as eternal damnation. IBN KATHĪR, *Bidāya*, viii: 303.

22 AL-YA‘QŪBĪ gave the year 71 A.H.: *Ta‘rīkh*, ii: 265. AL-MAS‘ŪDĪ placed the death of Muṣ‘ab in year 72. *Murāj*, iii: 115, as do most others: al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 286; al-DĪNAWĀRĪ, *al-Akḥbār al-tiwāl*, 319; Khalīfa B. KHAYYĀT, *Ta‘rīkh*, 205; IBN KATHĪR, *Bidāya*, viii: 299; al-KHAṬĪB, *Ta‘rīkh Baghdād*, xiii: 108. AL-ṬABARĪ, dating this battle to the year 71, acknowledged the disagreement about the date (*Annales*, ser. ii, 813). The problem with the date might be due to the fact that the first time that ‘Abd

Al-ṬABARĪ tells us that when the two forces met at Dayr al-Jāthalīq, ‘Abd al-Malik had already cleverly sent letters to the tribal leaders of Muṣ‘ab’s army before they joined battle. Muṣ‘ab’s sole trustworthy general present at the battle, Ibrāhīm b. al-Ashtar, is said to have brought his letter, unopened, to Muṣ‘ab.<sup>23</sup> Muṣ‘ab read it: it contained ‘Abd al-Malik’s offer to Ibrāhīm of the governorship of Iraq if he would desert Muṣ‘ab. Ibrāhīm warned Muṣ‘ab that all of the rest of his generals had received similar letters from ‘Abd al-Malik.

Thus the battle, in al-ṬABARĪ’s narrative, is dramatically set up for his readers, who know that Muṣ‘ab’s generals have been bribed by ‘Abd al-Malik.<sup>24</sup> Only Ibrāhīm b. al-Ashtar has remained loyal to Muṣ‘ab. Nonetheless, alerted that he was doomed, Muṣ‘ab continued with his battle plan, and the armies engaged. Ibrāhīm advanced, forcing back ‘Abd al-Malik’s army, but then Umayyad reinforcements were sent, and the loyal Ibrāhīm was killed. Muṣ‘ab called for his reinforcements—one by one, he called his generals to advance. Each in his turn refused.

Al-ṬABARĪ, transmitting from al-Madā’inī and al-Haytham b. ‘Adiyy, relates that at this point, ‘Abd al-Malik sent an offer of safe passage to Muṣ‘ab. Muṣ‘ab rejected the offer, but when his son ‘Īsā received a similar offer, he encouraged him to take it. ‘Īsā refused, saying: “Let not the women of Quraysh say that I delivered you up to be slain.”<sup>25</sup> Muṣ‘ab responded, “Then advance in front of me, and I will reckon on being rewarded by God for suffering your death during my lifetime.” So Muṣ‘ab’s son ‘Īsā went out to the battlefield in front of Muṣ‘ab and fought until he was killed.<sup>26</sup> In al-MAS‘ŪDĪ’s narrative, this dramatic moment is heightened: just as Muṣ‘ab was being urged to accept an offer of safe passage called out to him by one Umayyad soldier, another Umayyad soldier came forward to behead the body of his fallen son, ‘Īsā. Muṣ‘ab, unable to resist the impulse to defend his son’s body, rushed out to attack that Umayyad soldier, but then his horse was hit and crippled; as he stands on the ground fighting, he is filled with wounds, killed with a final stroke of the sword, then himself beheaded.

In al-ṬABARĪ’s narrative, after his son’s death, Muṣ‘ab is wounded by an arrow, struck by a spear, thrown to the ground and beheaded. His head was then brought to ‘Abd al-Malik. ‘Abd al-Malik paused and asked rhetorically, “When shall the women of Quraysh bear the like of Muṣ‘ab?”<sup>27</sup> Then he ordered his men: “Bury him—by God, we used to honor one another, but kingship is a barren and destructive thing.”<sup>28</sup>

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al-Malik and Muṣ‘ab took forces out to fight, they did not engage in battle, but returned the following year. See ‘ABD DIXON 1971: 134.

23 It bears noting that the father of Ibrāhīm b. al-Ashtar had been ‘Alī’s most loyal and energetic general in the battle of Siffin. Ibrāhīm himself was first a general in al-Mukhtār’s forces, but went over to the Zubayrids either slightly before or after al-Mukhtār’s death. See al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 336 f.

24 There are other ways in which the battle is dramatically set up for the audience—poetry is recited that foreshadows the outcome of the battle, for instance.

25 Al-ṬABARĪ, *Annales*, ser. ii, 809, according to an account transmitted from al-Haytham b. ‘Adī; a similar account was transmitted by ‘Umar b. Shabbah, 807-809.

26 Al-MAS‘ŪDĪ, *Murūj*, iii: 115.

27 This line is from the narrative of al-MAS‘ŪDĪ, *Murūj*, iii: 115.

28 “*Wārūhu, fa-qad wallāhi kānat-i ‘l-ḥurma baynī wa-baynahu qadīmat<sup>an</sup> wa-lākin hādhā ‘l-mulk ‘aqīm*. In Ibn Kathīr’s account, ‘Abd al-Malik states that Muṣ‘ab was among the people he most loved, but that kingship is a barren thing. IBN KATHĪR, *Bidāya*, viii: 306.

Now, to those familiar with the *maqtal* of al-Ḥusayn, this version of the *maqtal* of Muṣ'ab must have seemed vaguely familiar. The *maqtal* of al-Ḥusayn is more elaborate and dramatic, in all of aspects. But the basic elements of the story are common to both: the perfidy of the Iraqī tribal leaders, the sending off of sons and loyal supporters to battle before one goes to battle oneself, and the hopelessness of the battle against a much larger, more powerful army, combined with the hero's refusal to accept a guarantee of safety. This parallelism did not escape medieval Muslims: the story of Muṣ'ab b. al-Zubayr's *maqtal*, and the proximity of his grave to Baghdad, led later Iraqī Sunnis to invent a religious ritual—a procession to his grave—that paralleled the Shī'ī tradition of commemorating the death of al-Ḥusayn.<sup>29</sup>

ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Zubayr's *khuṭba* (sermon) on the death of Muṣ'ab is often recounted in the historical sources.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it often functions as a sort of link between the end of the *maqtal* of Muṣ'ab and the beginning of the final battles and *maqtal* of ʿAbd Allāh himself. Muṣ'ab had been ʿAbd Allāh's greatest strength in Iraq, and through him he had maintained his control of the provinces east of Iraq. In a single battle, the largest and richest part of ʿAbd Allāh's territory had slipped out of his hands; with the defeat and death of Muṣ'ab, he had lost not only his most important territories, but also his most powerful governor, general, and supporter.

Later historians knew well that this defeat spelled the beginning of the end for ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Zubayr. This was doubtless clear even at the time of the events. It is reported that for some days, Ibn al-Zubayr did not acknowledge the death of Muṣ'ab publicly, until “even the slaves of Medina and Mecca talked about it in alleyways.”<sup>31</sup>

When he finally ascended the *minbar* to address publicly news of his brother's death, he first waited for several minutes in silence, we are told, his brow covered with sweat, and distress apparent on his face.<sup>32</sup> Then he began his speech. In the report transmitted by al-BALĀDHURĪ, he began by praising God “to Whom belongs creation, authority, and sovereignty of this world and the Hereafter.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, he first praised God, whose will, he acknowledged, was being expressed in the unfolding of events. The next line of his reported *khuṭba* is even more explicit: “He gives dominion (*mulk*) to whomever he wills, and he takes it away from whomever He wills; He exalts whom He wills, and abases whom He wills; it is from Him that goodness comes, and He is powerful over all things.”

Ibn al-Zubayr's *khuṭba*, as it was remembered, thus addressed the problem of the discrepancy between God's will, as demonstrated through victory given in battle—God certainly seemed to be backing the Umayyads—and the Zubayrid belief that it was they who were fighting for the sake of righteousness, and thus they who should have received God's blessing. The sermon first affirms that God is owed praise for all things; He is all-

29 That commemoration I have treated at length elsewhere. See CAMPBELL 2003.

30 This is found in al-BALĀDHURĪ's *Ansāb*, v: 347-8; al-ṬABARĪ, *Annales*, ser. ii, 818-819; IBN AL-ATHĪR, *Kāmil*, 335-336; al-IṢFAHĀNĪ, *Aghānī*, xix: 89-90.

31 AL-MAS'ŪDĪ, *Murūj*, iii: 119; al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 347; al-IṢFAHĀNĪ, *Al-Aghānī*, xix: 89. AL-ṬABARĪ did not transmit this detail.

32 AL-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 347-348.

33 The account of al-BALĀDHURĪ is more detailed than the parallel account of al-ṬABARĪ, and forms the basis for the translation given here. See also al-MAS'ŪDĪ, *Murūj*, iii: 119, IBN AL-ATHĪR's *Kāmil*, iv: 335-336; al-ṬABARĪ, *Annales*, ser. ii, 818-819.



powerful, and it is He who determines who shall achieve earthly power, abasing or exalting whomever He chose. It then goes on, however, to refine the concepts of debasement and exaltation: “God does not abase the man who has righteousness on his side, nor does He exalt any man among the supporters of falsehood (*al-bāṭil*), even if all people should be on the side of the latter.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, even if the righteous should lose the battle on earth, they have not lost the battle for righteousness in the eyes of God; even if they should lose earthly dominion, they have not lost their places in the Hereafter.

Ibn al-Zubayr is said to have then asserted that the news of Muṣ‘ab’s death in Iraq both gladdened him and saddened him; although saddened by the loss of a beloved friend, “yet the man of judgment, religion, intelligence and understanding then embraces fitting forbearance and noble consolation.” He specified that what had gladdened him was the knowledge that Muṣ‘ab had died a martyr (*qatluhu shahāda*) and that “God made that an option for him and for us.”<sup>35</sup> He next condemned the Iraqis for betraying his brother, and compared the trial of Muṣ‘ab’s death to similar trials already endured by other noble Muslims, such as the assassination of ‘Uthmān. He concluded by reminding his listeners, “This world is but a loan from the All-Powerful King, whose dominion endures, whose sovereignty is ever-lasting; if it turns toward me, I shall not take it like a conceited ingrate; if it turns away, I shall not cry over it like a senile old man.” In other words, he asserts his own humility, his piety and his concern for the Hereafter in one final sweeping remark. AL-BALĀDHURĪ’s account has ‘Abd Allāh descend from the pulpit reciting a line of poetry that reflects his awareness of his impending doom: “Take me, O Hyena, drag me, and be gladdened/ by the meat of a man whose supporter did not live till today.”<sup>36</sup>

This speech not only presages ‘Abd Allāh’s death, it treats some of the crucial issues that faced later Muslims living with the memory of the strife that had torn asunder the early Muslim community: could God forsake those who tried to live righteously and to fight for the sake of Islam? Was victory in battle a barometer of God’s favor, or did it only bring the fruits of this world? Was it possible to categorize a death meted out by other Muslims as martyrdom? And, by implication, the question is raised: is this life, filled as it is with trials, with mistakes, with defeats, and with injustices gone unpunished, merely one long test, which the believer must ceaselessly try to pass?

### The Maqṭal of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr

The story of the death of ‘Abd Allāh himself at Mecca is yet more dramatically presented by al-ṬABARĪ than is Muṣ‘ab’s death.<sup>37</sup> AL-ṬABARĪ relied heavily upon al-Wāqidi for his

34 In the accounts of al-ṬABARĪ, al-MAS‘ŪDĪ, and IBN AL-ATHĪR the word used instead of “*al-bāṭil*” is “*al-Shayṭān*.”

35 AL-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 348. Michael FISHBEIN chose to translate *shahāda* as “testimony,” although in a footnote he gave “martyrdom” as an alternative; in this context, however, it should be translated “martyrdom.” AL-ṬABARĪ, *Victory of the Marwānids*, 194, note 700.

36 The line is “*khudhīnī fa-jurrīnī dibā’a wa-abshirī / bi-laḥmi ‘mri’ in lam yashhadi ‘l-yawma nāṣiruhu*.”

37 The reverse is true of al-Dīnawarī, who gives an extremely short account of the *maqṭal* of ‘Abd Allāh. AL-DĪNAWARĪ, *al-Akhhār al-ṭiwāl*, 314-315. The *maqṭal* of Ibn al-Zubayr plays a large role in most *tarājim* of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr as well as in histories covering the second *fitna*. The dialogue with

narrative of the fall of ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr. After ‘Abd al-Malik had defeated Muṣ‘ab, crushing ‘Abd Allāh was his next goal. He sent al-Ḥajjāj, the harsh and infamous henchman of the early Umayyads, against ‘Abd Allāh.

Al-Ḥajjāj and his forces first besieged ‘Abd Allāh and the Zubayrids at Mecca for several months, to starve them into submission. Catapults were set up, and Mecca was bombarded. Having earlier lost most of the provinces that had originally recognized him as caliph, ‘Abd Allāh could not now retain even his supporters in Mecca. Al-Ḥajjāj offered Ibn al-Zubayr’s supporters safe passage if they would leave Mecca, and as the months passed, most of ‘Abd Allāh’s supporters, including two of his sons, accepted the offer and left. ‘Abd Allāh’s blind and aged mother, Asmā’, the daughter of Abu Bakr, remained in Mecca with her son.

Al-ṬABARĪ, al-BALĀDHURĪ, IBN AL-ATHĪR, and many other historians relate that ‘Abd Allāh went to talk with his mother when he saw that his supporters were forsaking him. "Mother," he is reported to have said, "my people have forsaken me, even my two sons and my family. Only a few people remain, and they do not have the endurance to defend themselves for more than a short time. The enemy will give me whatever I want from this present world [a governorship in exchange for recognizing Umayyad authority.]<sup>38</sup> What is your advice?" His mother reportedly answered:

My son, you yourself know best. If you know that you are right and have been pursuing what is right (*al-ḥaqq*), then persevere in it, since your supporters have been killed while in the right.... But if you only desire the present world, then what a wretched servant of God you are—you have destroyed yourself and those who were killed fighting with you. If you say, ‘I was in the right, but when my companions grew feeble, I became weak’, that is not how free men and men of religion, act. How long will you last in this world? To be killed is better!

‘Abd Allāh drew near and kissed her head, and said:

By God, this is my opinion too. By Him to whom I have been calling men until this very day, I have not inclined to the present world, nor have I loved life in it. Nothing but indignation for God’s sake, and that His sacred territory not be profaned, made me rebel. But I wanted to know your opinion, and you have increased my own firm belief. Mother, I will be killed today—let your grief for me not be severe; submit to God’s command, [and take comfort that] your son never intentionally did anything dishonorable or indecent: he was not unjust in applying God’s laws, he betrayed no trust, nor did he wrong any Muslim or any confederate (*mu‘āhid*.) If I heard of any injustice committed by a governor, I never let it pass: I reproved them for it. I have never preferred anything to my Lord’s approval. O God, I do not say this to justify

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his mother is nearly always featured. Here I rely primarily upon the *maqṭal* as found in al-ṬABARĪ’s and al-BALĀDHURĪ’s works. Al-ṬABARĪ, *Annales*, ser. ii, 844-852, al-ṬABARĪ, *Victory of the Marwānids*, 224-232; al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 360-373.

38 Al-ṬABARĪ does not explain this in this account, which was transmitted by Muḥammad b. Sa’d from al-Wāqidi. The translation here draws heavily from but does not duplicate Michael Fishbein’s able translation: *Victory of the Marwānids*, 226 .

myself—You know me best! I say this to comfort my mother so that she might endure losing me with forbearance.<sup>39</sup>

Needless to say, this exchange has clearly been fabricated or elaborated by biographers and historians. The issue of authenticity can hardly be at stake here—reported conversations are highly unlikely to contain much (if any) authentic material, as NOTH and CONRAD have observed.<sup>40</sup> Rather, this dramatic exchange is a rhetorical vehicle in which a once-important contender for the leadership of the Islamic community is given a voice with which to vindicate himself to posterity. As a character in the unfolding drama of the *umma*'s experience on earth, Ibn al-Zubayr responds in this exchange to his mother's questions about his motives by establishing his reputation: he never wronged anyone, he tried to be an upright Islamic leader, he only attempted, out of a sense of indignation that the Muslim community was being led astray, to set things aright. He did not, he is portrayed as clarifying, seek leadership for worldly gain, but rather for God's approval—it was not by ambition that he was motivated to act, but by a sense of religious righteousness.

It is not coincidental that Ibn al-Zubayr's speech in this passage shifts from addressing his mother to addressing God: "I have never preferred anything to my Lord's approval. *O God*, I do not say this to justify myself—You know me best! I say this to comfort my mother so that she might endure losing me with forbearance." The author/s of these words may have thought the speech had begun to seem a little too clearly aimed at establishing the righteousness of Ibn al-Zubayr's cause, or a bit too much like vaunting. Therefore, a justification was included: Ibn al-Zubayr is made to claim—to God—that he is saying all of this to comfort his mother, who is about to suffer the loss of her son. This rhetorical strategy helps to persuade the audience of the authenticity (and decency) of Ibn al-Zubayr's defense of his reputation.

Throughout this exchange, his mother is positioned as a foil: she asks, he answers; she advises, he responds; she will suffer, he will die. Why does she ask? In order to allow the audience to read or hear his answers. She is dramaturgically positioned as the voice of the good Muslim who is given the chance to speak to this historically important character. What does she ask? She asks whether he was fighting for the sake of righteousness or not—the question for which Muslims would have wanted to have the answer. Had not God shown approval for the Umayyad cause by granting them victory? Surely some people suspected that Ibn al-Zubayr was just another self-serving man driven by ambition for worldly power. How could one know?

One could perhaps never know what God thought of all of this, but to get Ibn al-Zubayr's own final appraisal of his earthly career helped to establish a basis upon which to

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39 AL-ṬABARĪ, *Ta'riḫ* (ed. Ibrāhīm), vi: 188-189 ; *Annales* ser. ii, 846; *Victory of the Marwānids*, 226. Versions of this exchange abound in biographical entries on 'Abd Allāh, such as those by Ibn Khallikān, al-Ṣafādī, and al-Suyūfī. The dramatic value of this exchange was well-recognized by Muslim authors: it provided a summary of 'Abd Allāh's character and motivations, while affirming the noble character of his mother Asmā' bint Abī Bakr. Stories about Asmā's noble comportment after the death of her son, too, left a strong mark in the minds of both modern and medieval Muslims. Bayḥaqī used her story as an example of how forbearing mothers could be in the context of his description of the execution of the Ghaznavid vizier, Hasanak, and his mother's brave response. MEISAMI 1995: 360-361.

40 NOTH/CONRAD 1994: 87-96.

formulate a judgment of him. This is the backdrop against which this exchange is to be read: the question that the transmitters and historians were answering was, “Who were the righteous ones in this struggle?” The best voices that they could use in answering this question were the historical actors’ own voices.<sup>41</sup>

As is well known, according to the logic of this historiographic tradition, historians lost authority if they supplied the audience directly with their own understanding of events: instead, they had to allow historical actors and witnesses to speak directly to the audience of the text, so that readers might infer from their reported words and deeds what had motivated them.<sup>42</sup> Readers could not be directly told what the import of events might be, or what motivated people, since to assume that one could speak authoritatively about other people’s motivations was to call into question the reliability of one’s account. This naturally affected how accounts were crafted: they had to be cast as dialogue overheard, speeches made publicly, and actions witnessed.

In case the exchange between Ibn al-Zubayr and his mother itself was not enough to establish his status as a righteous early Muslim—if not a martyr—historians included other clues. When Ibn al-Zubayr went to embrace his blind mother, she felt that he had on a coat of mail and a helmet. She told him to take them off, saying, “This is not the action of someone who intends what you intend.” He then took off the helmet and chain mail, the more easily to be killed. This point would not have been lost on the original intended audience of the account, who knew that to go into battle unprotected by a coat of mail was to seek a distinctly more noble death, a more clearly delineated martyrdom.<sup>43</sup> His mother, knowing that her son was about to meet his death, encouraged him to mark it as a martyr’s death. It is only through this device, through her urging him to remove his coat of mail and his reported compliance, that the audience discovers that Ibn al-Zubayr went into the battlefield without armor, the more easily to be killed.

The intended audience was also assumed to know that the practice of sending one’s children out to battle to die as martyrs or heroes was a recognized way of gaining reward in the afterlife, as recompense for trials and afflictions suffered in this life.<sup>44</sup> It was a particularly grueling form of pious suffering to lose one’s children in battle before one’s very eyes. Al-Ḥusayn, Muṣ‘ab, and Asmā’ bint Abī Bakr, among many others, are remembered to have allowed or encouraged their sons to go to battle before them to be slain.

At their final goodbye, Asmā’ is reported to have remarked to her son, “Whoever else may have been killed while in error, you shall have been killed while in the right.” She then yielded him to God, declaring her contentment with God’s will and decree.

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41 On the relationship between the *isnād* and the way that an account is recounted, see Daniel Beaumont’s fascinating article (BEAUMONT 1996).

42 Tarif KHALIDI quotes al-MAS‘ŪDĪ’s statement (in *Murūj*) that his readers must “deduce from what we have recorded our intent, which we omitted to record.” Al-MAS‘ŪDĪ candidly admitted that his interpretation of history colored his work, but that he would not comment directly on the meaning of historical events. KHALIDI 1975: 128, note 3.

43 Voluntarily seeking martyrdom was considered praiseworthy. It is related that the Prophet had encouraged Ibn ‘Afrā’ to “plunge into battle” without armor. See KOHLBERG 1997: 7-11. In IBN KATHĪR’s version of this exchange, Asmā’, upon feeling the coat of mail, said, “O my son, this is not what one who wants martyrdom (*al-shahāda*) wears.” IBN KATHĪR, *Bidāya*, viii: 315.

44 On this, see LANE 1863: s.v. “*ḥā’ sīn bā’*” (*iḥtasaba*).

After consulting with his mother, ‘Abd Allāh, we are told, went out to fight. He fought valiantly, “like a lion in a thicket,” till at last someone threw a brick that struck his head. Blood poured down from his face, and he recited

It is not on our heels, [fleeing,] that our wounds bleed  
but rather on our feet, [as we advance].<sup>45</sup>

The enemy gathered against him, and he repelled them several times. But he could not forestall fate, and finally, he was slain. Al-Ḥajjāj had him beheaded, and his body impaled. Ibn al-Zubayr’s corpse was displayed so that everyone could see “God’s judgment,” since, for the Umayyads, victory showed that God was on their side. But the story’s later audience understood that ‘Abd Allāh, no matter what his previous mistakes may have been, had met his death nobly, having fought with the conviction that he was fighting for *al-ḥaqq*, for God, for the Truth, for pious righteousness.

This has been made clear through the reported dialogue with his mother, as well as by reported words and actions: his intimating in the *khutba* that martyrdom would be his fate, his decision to fight unto death for his cause, unprotected by armor, and the heroism attributed to him in his last battle. The reported actions, dialogues, speeches and poetry act in concert, in this case as in others, as effective rhetorical tools used by transmitters, historians and biographers to establish the nobility of character, righteousness, piety, and the redemptive suffering of the often flawed subjects of *maqātil*.<sup>46</sup>

While the content of many *maqātil* were obviously aimed at addressing questions about character and hinting at ultimate fate, it is less obvious that these accounts were considered directly inspirational. However, internal evidence confirms for us that stories of how noble men had bravely persevered in their causes and met their deaths in battle rather than capitulate were indeed considered inspirational. Al-ṬABARĪ, in his treatment of the *maqtal* of Muṣ‘ab b. al-Zubayr, includes an account related by ‘Urwa b. al-Mughīra b. Shu‘ba. In this account, ‘Urwa reports:

Muṣ‘ab came marching out [to the battlefield.] He was leaning on the mane of his horse, looking right and left at the men. His eye fell on me. He said, ‘Urwa, come here.’ I went over to him. He said, ‘Tell me about al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī, [about how] he acted in refusing to submit to the judgment of Ibn Ziyād, and his resolve to fight.’ Then he [Muṣ‘ab] recited two lines of poetry that invoked the example of al-Ḥusayn: ‘Those of the Bānū Hāshim [buried] at al-Ṭaff [Karbala’] were consoled by the no-

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45 These lines are said to have been recited by him in many versions of this scene: al-ṬABARĪ, *Annales*, ser. ii, 851; al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 365; IBN KATHĪR, *Bidāya*, viii: 315; IBN AL-ATHĪR, *Kāmil*, v: 357. The very same lines are sometimes attributed to Ibn al-Zubayr’s brother ‘Amr, who was sent against him by the Umayyads before the first siege of Mecca, in the year 60. See al-ṬABARĪ, *Annales*, ser. ii, 227. If we assume historians to have been extremely clever craftsmen, this would be significant. However, I suspect it merely reflects a vague association between these two verses and the career of Ibn al-Zubayr.

46 For a modern example, see remarks made by the editor of al-TANŪKHĪ’s *al-Faraj ba’d al-shidda*, ‘Abbūd al-Thālījī, who concludes a 26-line long footnote on ‘Abd Allāh by saying, “‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr ended his life with a deed of bravery and sacrifice rarely equaled.” He then gives, in very brief form, the encounter with Asmā’ and the climax. al-TANŪKHĪ, *al-Faraj*, i: 169-70.

ble suffering endured by others before them/ they set the example of noble men drawing consolation from the suffering of others.’<sup>47</sup>

‘Urwa ends his report by saying “And I knew then that he would not turn away until he was killed.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, ‘Urwa is portrayed as having understood, upon hearing Muṣ‘ab’s request that the story of al-Ḥusayn’s *maqtal* be retold to him—and upon hearing Muṣ‘ab recite these two lines of poetry—that Muṣ‘ab himself wanted to draw inspiration from the story of al-Ḥusayn’s *maqtal*, in order to prepare himself to face his own impending death nobly. The *maqtal* of al-Ḥusayn is invoked as an inspirational text in this account, and poetical reference is made to al-Ḥusayn and those killed with him, at al-Ṭaff/Karbalā’, having taken consolation in recalling the trials endured by yet others before them as well.

In the parallel account given by al-DĪNAWARĪ in his *al-Akhhār al-ṭiwāl*, ‘Urwa tells Muṣ‘ab the story of how al-Ḥusayn was presented with terms of surrender that he could not accept, and how he refused them to instead face death with forbearance. Then, citing the same lines of poetry, Muṣ‘ab decisively whips his horse into action.<sup>49</sup> In DĪNAWARĪ’s report, the ordering of events make it clear that Muṣ‘ab should be understood to have heard the story of al-Ḥusayn, to have drawn inspiration from it to act in like manner, and to have immediately acted.

Such accounts show that certainly by the early 3<sup>rd</sup> / 9<sup>th</sup> century (though likely by the late first century) certain *maqātil* were understood as inspirational accounts.<sup>50</sup> This point is underscored both in the lines of poetry reportedly recited by Muṣ‘ab—the lines that he recites specifically mention taking consolation in the example of others who have suffered before—and in the interpretation of his act of reciting those lines: “and I knew then that he would not turn away until he was killed.”

To the question of whether or not the men whose deaths were retold and memorialized in these accounts were martyrs, hints were given: Muṣ‘ab’s *maqtal* suggests that his case was parallel to that of al-Ḥusayn; ‘Abd Allāh’s *maqtal* includes clear indications that he (and his mother) saw his impending death as martyrdom, and that worldly gain was not what he really sought, but rather the Hereafter. For the historians and transmitters of the

47 The poetry recited on this occasion was translated by LANE 1863: i, 87 s.v. “alif-lām-yā’ (“ūlī”); also i, 60, “alif-sīn-wāw. The *bayt* is “*wa-inna ‘l-ūlā bi-‘l-Ṭaffi min āli Hāshimīn / ta’āsaw (or: ta’assaw) fa-sannū lil-kirāmi ‘l-ta’āsiya (or: al-ta’assiya).*” It seems highly improbable that the Hāshimīs who died at al-Ṭaff were praised for their generosity instead of for their suffering and forbearance. The verse, attributed to Sulaymān b. Qatta in al-IṢFAHĀNĪ’s *Kitāb al-aghānī*, is there given with the maṣdar of the fifth form, which fits the meaning better; in the version of al-ṬABARĪ’s *Ta’rīkh* edited by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl IBRĀHĪM, it is also given as *ta’assaw/al-ta’assiya*, reflecting that editor’s similar preference for the meaning that I have chosen here; the same choice was made for al-Balādhurī’s report: al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 339.

48 Variations on this report are given in al-IṢFAHĀNĪ, *Aghānī*, xix: 89; al-BALĀDHURĪ’s *Ansāb*, v: 339.

49 This detail is from al-DĪNAWARĪ, *al-Akhhār al-ṭiwāl*, 311. In al-Balādhurī’s report (from ‘Awāna), Muṣ‘ab recites the line directly after being told that his Iraqi generals had deserted him, which makes the link to al-Ḥusayn’s situation strong and clear. al-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb*, v: 338.

50 Even al-Ḥajjāj is said to have found the example of Muṣ‘ab’s noble death compelling: facing the difficulty of fighting the threatening *khārījī* leader Shabīb, his supporters tried to convince him to turn back. al-Ḥajjāj, as reported in *al-Aghānī*, asked rhetorically, “*Hal taraka Muṣ‘ab<sup>um</sup> li-karīm<sup>in</sup> maḥarr<sup>um</sup>?*” (Has Muṣ‘ab left the noble man the possibility of fleeing?) al-IṢFAHĀNĪ, *Aghānī*, xix: 89 (“*maqtal* Muṣ‘ab b. al-Zubayr”).

Sunni historiographic tradition, the point was likely not to establish with certainty that the deaths portrayed were indeed the deaths of martyrs but rather to suggest it. Only God could know for certain.

Needless to say, the historical information conveyed in these texts is useful for understanding the values, the concerns, and the ideals of later Muslims. Like other rhetorical arenas in Islamic historiography, however, they cannot be considered straightforward reports of what men actually said or did upon or before dying in battle. They were probably never understood to be exactly that by early Muslim scholars: as GOLDZIHAR argued was the case for moral or ethical *hadīths*, I believe that one should assume that Muslim historians transmitted *maqātil* accounts with the understanding that some fabrication, some degree of creative transmission, was tolerable if it enhanced their edifying value, their redemptive function, and their dramatic appeal.<sup>51</sup> Elaboration rendered accounts more distinctly edifying, and helped the audience to understand the *meaning* of the past.

This does not mean that the basic facts of the events are untrue. We can assume that Muṣʿab b. al-Zubayr was killed near Maskin, in a battle with ʿAbd al-Malik’s forces, and that his son ʿĪsā was killed there as well.<sup>52</sup> But did Muṣʿab call someone to describe the forbearance of al-Ḥusayn and his supporters before going out to battle? Did he recite poetry? Perhaps: it is not entirely unreasonable, as modern studies of poetry in Arab societies remind us—poetry was an important element in Arab life then, as it still is in many parts of the Arab world, known to many who might recite apposite lines in a time of crisis.<sup>53</sup> But if he did not, perhaps historians and transmitters understood that he should be remembered as having done so, since to portray Muṣʿab in his last moments invoking the memory of al-Ḥusayn’s last moments through poetry renders the story of Muṣʿab’s death more evocative and suggests a direct parallel between him and the Shīʿī figure of al-Ḥusayn.

The same is of course true of the death of ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Zubayr: we can trust that he and his forces survived the first siege of Mecca, and fell in the second siege and campaign against him. But did he consult his mother, and explain to her his comportment and motivation? This seems highly doubtful. She had not been previously cut off from contact with him; could it be that it was only just before his death that he found time to explain himself to her? The entire reported conversation between ʿAbd Allāh and his mother in these texts functions as a vehicle for presenting a distillation of his character and cause, for answering the questions later Muslims would have wanted answered.

*Maqātil* summed up individuals’ lives, causes and ultimate values by portraying their last words and final acts. They indirectly answered the question of how pious Muslim forebears could have fought other Muslims unto death (by fighting for righteousness). They gave clues about whether or not they might be considered martyrs. They thus functioned as an arena of redemptive memory, redeeming an otherwise troubled past, in which men famed for their piety were slain as if God had abandoned them, and esteemed forebears fought unto death. They were also inspirational texts, as has been shown. And in the late antique world in which these accounts were transmitted, narratives about martyrs

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51 GOLDZIHAR 1967: 145-153, *et passim*.

52 These are the kinds of “facts” that remain undisputed within the tradition, and seem to be resistant to modification. See CRONE 1980.

53 The classic works on this include: ABU LUGHOD 1986, BAILEY 1991, and CATON 1990.

commonly served to emotionally bind people to perceived forebears in communities of suffering and courageous righteousness.<sup>54</sup> *Maqātil* appear to have fulfilled some of this role, binding later Muslims to pious Sunni forebears. Moreover, combining elements of tragedy, religious commitment, and heroic sacrifice, they were compelling to recount and to read.

*Maqātil* thus served both religious and literary functions in this historical tradition. They evocatively illustrated for posterity historical characters' most deeply-held values, suggested possibilities about their ultimate fates, and helped to explain, in the case of Companions and Successors, how it could have come to pass that these esteemed forebears of the community had fought each other unto death. In the cases of Muṣ'ab and 'Abd Allāh, accounts of how these men had nobly faced death for the sake of a primordial "purity of faith" supplied certain later Sunnis, when they felt communally threatened, with narratives that could engender a sense of belonging to a stable group with ancient, legitimate roots in the lives of the Companions and Successors.<sup>55</sup> The *maqātil* of the two sons of al-Zubayr explored here reflect the literary, interpretive and inspirational functions of Islamic historical narratives, as well as some of the concerns that shaped how the early history of the Islamic community was remembered and retold.

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54 On the function of "the shared remembrance" of martyrs "inscribed in literary texts" as a means of uniting members of religious or political communities into "communities of suffering," see PANNEWICK 2004a: 9-12 and PANNEWICK 2004b, 48-57.

55 On those rituals, see CAMPBELL 2003, as noted above.



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