Ibn ʿAsākir’s Peculiar Biography of Khālid al-Qasrī

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Khālid al-Qasrī (d. 126/743) was one of the most controversial and celebrated figures of the late Umayyad period. His ruthlessly successful reign as governor of Iraq and as viceroy of the East during the caliphate of Hishām b. ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 106/724–126/743) coupled with his spectacular reversal of fortunes after his removal from this elevated post provided fodder for historians, poets, and storytellers of later generations. His cruel demise eventually came to be seen as a crucial episode in the collapse of the Umayyad dynasty he served, and even as a microcosm of all the dynasty’s failings. Themes of honor, tribal pride, greed, and injustice permeate this narrative.

Given the importance that both medieval and modern scholars have attached to Khālid, it is surprising to find a relatively late revisionist version of his career and its end in Ibn ʿAsākir’s Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq (TMD). The discussion that follows will demonstrate that Ibn ʿAsākir had the standard narrative at hand, but chose to ignore it. He relied instead on alternative sources to paint a different image of Khālid, his career, and his fall from grace. This obvious effort to revise the narrative of a crucial Umayyad-era figure illustrates Ibn ʿAsākir’s revisionist agenda and raises questions about his treatment of other controversial Umayyad-era figures.

It is equally surprising that modern scholars have overlooked this alternative narrative, despite the fact that portions of it are preserved in other, even later sources that have been more readily accessible than the TMD. A close examination of Ibn ʿAsākir’s alternative interpretation of Khālid and his demise is overdue and will raise important questions about the traditional narrative of his life and death and about when this narrative came to be the accepted truth.

This examination will begin with a brief recounting of the traditional story of Khālid’s life, presented most coherently by al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), and a summary of its interpretation by modern scholars. Turning to Ibn ʿAsākir, it will offer a general summary of his alternative narrative and point out its influence on later retellings of the story. The paper will then examine the notable differences between Ibn ʿAsākir’s version and the standard narrative, with particular attention to several omissions and obvious revisions in Ibn ʿAsākir’s account. Finally, a tentative explanation of the agenda behind Ibn ʿAsākir’s revisionist narrative will be offered, along with a consideration of the implications of

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1 Ibn ʿAsākir, Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq 16, 135–63.
his account for efforts to reconstruct late Umayyad history and later Arabic historiography.

Most discussions of Khālid al-Qasrī focus on the long, parallel accounts of his career offered by al-Ṭabarī and al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892). The bulk of this tale derives from accounts of al-Haytham b. ʿAdī (d. ca. 206/821), whose credibility was widely questioned by later scholars. Because the story and its sources have been analyzed in great detail by Stefan Leder, only a general summary will be offered here.

Khālid first served as governor of the Ḥijāz, either during the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 66/685–85/705), al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 85/705–96/715) or Sulaymān (r. 97/715–99/717). Details of his service in Mecca are sparse and the dates of his service do not appear consistently in the sources. The most noted and controversial element of his tenure at Mecca appears to be his efforts to pipe water to the Kaʿba to supplement the dwindling flow of Zamzam, an alteration some considered a desecration of the holy site. He was dismissed from his post in the Ḥijāz sometime during the reign of Sulaymān.

Khālid reappears at the beginning of Hishām’s reign when he was appointed over Iraq. In the traditional account, his tenure as governor of Iraq was marked by deep tribal divisions and by his intense rivalry with Yūsuf b. ʿUmar, the leader of the Qaysī tribal bloc. Accusations of corruption and embezzlement, coupled with intense lobbying by his foe Yūsuf b. ʿUmar, eventually persuaded Hishām to remove Khālid from his post and to replace him with Yūsuf. Khālid managed to avoid further consequences for his alleged wrongdoings until al-Walīd b. Yazīd came to power in 126/743. Al-Walīd then turned Khālid over to Yūsuf b. ʿUmar in exchange for a substantial and much-needed cash infusion. Yūsuf was convinced that Khālid had indeed embezzled and hidden significant sums of money and tried tirelessly to compel his prisoner to relinquish his ill-gotten gains. The sources remain somewhat ambiguous about whether Khālid actually had absconded with money rightfully belonging to the treasury. Khālid refused to admit to wrongdoing or to hand over any money to Yūsuf. Yūsuf ultimately tortured him to death, an event that al-Ṭabarī and other sources described in graphic, sometimes poetic detail. In al-Ṭabarī’s narrative, the entire affair serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of greed and tribal strife, as well as an illustration of al-Walīd’s general depravity.

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2 Al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh 2, 1812–25; al-Balādhurī, Ansāb al-ashrāf 7, 452–5.
4 Leder, Downfall 72–96.
5 Regarding Khālid specifically, see Leder, Features of the novel. Regarding themes in al-Ṭabarī’s overall narrative of the late Umayyad period, see Judd, Narratives and character 209–25.