THE MEDINAN WIVES OF ‘UMAR B. AL-KHAṬṬĀB AND HIS BROTHER, ZAYD

by

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For Franz Rosenthal on his eighty-fifth birthday

The Arabic genealogical literature, which is the outcome of the well-known Arab preoccupation with genealogy, is one of the best sources for the study of early Islamic history. This short paper analyzes several interesting genealogical details relating to the second of the Righteous Caliphs, ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, and his brother, Zayd. It will be shown that two of ‘Umar’s wives belonged to the Aws, more precisely, to the ‘Amr b. ‘Awf (who were inhabitants of the village of Quba’ to the south of Medina). Interestingly, ‘Umar’s elder brother, Zayd, also had two wives from among the ‘Amr b. ‘Awf. Two of these four marriages are especially notable: after the Hijra, ‘Umar married the granddaughter of the Prophet’s arch-enemy, Abu ‘Amir, nicknamed al-rāḥib, or “the God-fearing”, while before the Hijra Zayd married Abū ‘Āmir’s daughter.¹

1. ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb

1.1. Su‘ayda bint Rāfi’

Let us begin with the least known of these marriages. The list of ‘Umar’s sons in Mus‘ab al-Zubayri’s Nasab Quraysh is concluded with ‘Abdallāh

al-asghar, "the younger 'Abdallah", so called to differentiate between him and 'Abdallah al-akbar, i.e., the famous scholar, 'Abdallah b. 'Umar (or Ibn 'Umar). The former's mother was Su'ayda bint Rafi' b. Ubayd 2 b. 'Amr b. Ubayd b. Umayya b. Zayd of the 'Amr b. 'Awf, or more accurately, of the Umayya b. Zayd subdivision. Curiously, the Companion dictionaries contain no entry on either Su'ayda or her father, Rafi'. This is unusual because the Islamic community showed great interest in 'Umar's life, as is demonstrated, for example, by the extensive biography dedicated to him by Ibn Sa'd's Tabaqat, taking up over one hundred pages of the printed edition. Abū Bakr's biography in the same source takes up over forty, 'Uthmān's, thirty and 'Ali's, twenty. For some reason, this son, 'Abdallah al-asghar, is not mentioned in the list of 'Umar's children in various sources.4

Evidence relevant to the identification of 'Abdallah al-asghar's mother, Su'ayda bint Rāfī', is included in the list of the women who pledged their allegiance to the Prophet. Among the Ansārī women, and more precisely, among the women who belonged to the 'Amr b. 'Awf, we find a woman called Su'ayda whose pedigree shows close affinity to that of our Su'ayda:

Su'ayda bint Rīfā'a b. 'Amr b. 'Ubayd b. Umayya [b. Zayd].5

A comparison with the pedigree quoted above from Mus'ab al-Zubayri leads to the conclusion that the two Su'aydas were cousins since their respective fathers, Rīfā'a and Rāfī', were brothers:

Su'ayda bint Rāfī' [b. 'Ubayd] b. 'Amr b. 'Ubayd b. Umayya b. Zayd.6

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2 This "'Ubayd" is possibly superfluous; see below, n. 6.
6 "'Ubayd" was written twice due to dittography. Instead of "... b. 'Ubayd b. 'Amr b. 'Ubayd, ...", read "... b. 'Amr b. 'Ubayd". Alternatively, one of the two "'Ubayd"s may have been omitted in other versions of this pedigree. See, for example, Ibn Sa'd's list of the 'Amr b. 'Awf women who pledged their allegiance to the Prophet, which contains yet another cousin who was also named Su'ayda: Su'ayda bint Bashīr/Bushayr b. 'Ubayd b. 'Amr b. 'Ubayd b. Umayya b. Zayd; Ibn Sa'd, Tabaqāt, VIII, 349. The possibility of confusion among the genealogists with regard to the father's name (Rīfā'a/Rafī'/Bashīr or Bushayr), which led to