

Repurposed Narratives: The Battle of Şiffin and the Historical Memory of the Umayyad Dynasty

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Abstract

The Battle of Ṣiffīn (36/657) is the flash point in the emergence of sects within Islam. The presentation of the Ṣiffīn story in Arabic historical writing therefore changed over time as the sectarian split among Sunnīs and Shīʿites became increasingly defined. This paper will trace the development of the presentation of the Ṣiffīn story in Arabic histories across developing Sunnī and Shīʿite identity crystallization and the region of origin of their authors, as well as literary and stylistic developments in the field of Arabic historical writing.

The specific historians examined have been chosen in part because they demonstrate a particular chronological progression of the Ṣiffīn story from a fundamentally pro-ʿAlid episode of the first *fitna* to something approaching an pro-Umayyad apologetic, but also in part because they represent a broad spectrum of historiographical styles. This article will demonstrate that in these successive generations of historians, small (or large) changes in the presentation of the story, the main characters, and the style of narration reflect the regionally diverse and evolving sectarian memories, of Ṣiffīn in particular and the first *fitna* in general.

Keywords

Siffin, Ali, Mu'awiya, Sunni, Shi'ite, Islamic History, Fitna

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Cover Page Footnote

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Repurposed Narratives:

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Introduction

The Battle of Şifîn (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 Sunnî Arabic historians, that is precisely what it became. The Şifîn story—the narrative of the famous battle on the banks of the Euphrates River, about midway between Baghdad and Damascus, between the Caliph ‘Alî ibn Abî Tâlib and Mu‘âwiya ibn Abî Sufyân, then the governor of Syria, over the rightness of ‘Alî’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 Sunnî and Shī‘î (or Shī‘ite)—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 Şifîn was an early climax in the first *fitna*, or period of inter-Muslim communal strife. The historians who wrote about Şifîn—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 Şifîn 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 Sunnîs and those whose ideas about the legitimacy (and proper identity) of the ruler would later make them Shī‘îs 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 Şifîn 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-‘Alids examined in this article) who remembered the Umayyads as iniquitous, even evil, the Şifîn story was an easy venue for vilifying Mu‘âwiya (the founder of the Umayyad dynasty) and the Syrians. For the pro-‘Alids, the fact that Şifîn is a story that explains how, through their trickery and the foolish credulity of some of ‘Alî’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 Sunnîs) 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 Şifîn story.

Through comparative textual analysis and a literary historiographical engagement, this study traces a certain strand of Sunnî, pro-Umayyad (more accurately, pro-Syrian) sympathy that emerged in Arabic universal chronicles, with the battle of Şifîn 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 Shī'ī story assumes a decidedly Sunnī flavor. The earlier sources are decidedly pro-'Alid (as are most extant early histories): Naṣr ibn Muzāhim al-Minqarī's (d. 212/827) *Waq'at Ṣiffīn*, Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī's (d. 3rd/9th c.) *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, al-Dīnawarī's (d. ca. 282/895) *al-Akḥbār al-Ṭiwāl*, al-Ya'qūbī's (d. 284/897) *Ta'rīkh*, al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) *Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wa-al-Mulūk*, al-Mas'ūdī's (d.345/956) *Murūj al-Dḥahab*, and al-Maqdisī's (d. late 4th/10th c.) *Kitāb al-Bad' wa-al-Ta'rīkh*. The (later) Syrian Sunnī sources are Ibn al-Athīr's (d. 630/1233) *al-Kāmil fī al-Ta'rīkh*, Ibn 'Asākir's (d. 571/1176) *Ta'rīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, Ibn al-'Adīm's (d.660/1262) *Bughyat al-Ṭalab fī Ta'rīkh 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 *Waq'at 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-'Alid 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) Robinson¹ 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

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 'Abbāsīd 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, “Qur'anic 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 'Abbāsīd 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 Şifîn for a number of reasons, preeminent among them the resonance the Şifîn 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 Şifîn story to develop into a rehabilitative episode for the Umayyad legacy.

Establishing the Foundation text: Naşr ibn Muzāhim and the Contours of the Şifîn Story

In approaching the Şifîn story as such a literary artifact, the first step in tracing its development is to recognize the fact that one text—Naşr ibn Muzāhim al-Minqarī’s⁴ *Waqʿat Şifîn*—exists as the foundation text for the Şifîn story. The foundation text is a concept articulated used most recently by Antoine Borrut in his study of Umayyad historical memory, *Entre mémoire 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 Şifîn*. *Waqʿat Şifîn* does indeed elaborate the framework of the course of the battle of Şifîn 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 Şifîn that was not first presented in *Waqʿat Şifîn*, 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 Şifîn remained that of Naşr ibn Muzāhim.

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

⁴ See Carl Brockelmann, “Naşr ibn Muzāhim: der älteste Geschichtsschreiber der Schia,” *Zeitschrift für Semitisch 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 Literatur (GAL)*, Supplementband I, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1937), p. 214.

⁵ Antoine Borrut, *Entre mémoire 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 A‘tham al-Kūfī’s *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*,⁶ Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim’s *Waq‘at 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, *Waq‘at 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 *Waq‘at 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 *Waq‘at 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 *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*, and whose work is frequently cited by later historians directly. With a list of sources that include Abū Mikhnaḥ (d. 157/774), ‘Umar ibn Sa‘d⁸ (d. ca. 180/796), ‘Awāna ibn al-Ḥakam al-Kalbī (d. 147/764 or 153/770), and Sayf ibn ‘Umar⁹ (d. 180/796)—all of them from Iraq, where support for ‘Alī 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-‘Alī viewpoint. Consider the installment of the Ṣiffīn story in which ‘Alī and his army arrive at the banks of the Euphrates, thirsty from marching, and are denied drink by Mu‘āwiya 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 *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn*:

Naṣr—‘Umar ibn Sa‘d—Yūsuf ibn Yazīd—‘Abd Allāh ibn Awf ibn Al-Aḥmar: ...We made haste towards the Commander of the Faithful [‘Alī] and informed him of this. He called Ṣa‘ṣa‘a ibn Ṣūḥān and said, “Go to Mu‘āwiya 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 Mu‘āwiya said to his companions, “What do you think?” Al-Walīd ibn ‘Uqba said, “Deny them the water, as they denied it to Ibn ‘Affān

⁶ The critical version of *Kitāb al-Futūḥ* used here was published in Beirut, at Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, in 1914 and reprinted 1986.

⁷ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, p. 16.

⁸ In some secondary sources, including Petersen’s *‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, his name is rendered as ‘Umar ibn Sa‘īd, perhaps so as not to confuse him with ‘Umar ibn Sa‘d, the leader of the force that killed al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī. In *Waq‘at Ṣiffīn* and elsewhere, his name is clearly rendered as ‘Umar ibn Sa‘d.

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 Badr¹² 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.” Mu‘āwiya said, “No, by God! They shall die thirsty, as ‘Uthmān died.”¹³

Compare this to the excerpt from *Waq‘at Šiffīn*—itself no Umayyad apologetic—in which al-Walīd ibn ‘Uqba, an otherwise minor character, advocates letting ‘Alī and his army die of dehydration, while Mu‘āwiya plays a more passive role. Mu‘āwiya influence truly began to wax in the conflict with ‘Alī, and the subsequent widespread distaste for the Umayyad dynasty—particularly around the middle of the tenth century AD, when al-Mas‘ūdī lived and when Shī‘ism 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 ‘Abbasid milieu, like al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Maqqdisī, to focus the villainous acts on Mu‘āwiya (who was, of course, the leader of what they saw as an illegitimate party and the founder of an immoral dynasty) and ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ, 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 Mu‘āwiya himself, of the loathsome initiative to make ‘Alī “die thirsty” may seem minor. However, it is precisely this kind of variation that makes the *Šiffīn* 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 ‘Alid, *Akhbārī* and *Mu‘arrikhī*: The Story Develops

The Sunnī-Shī‘ī sectarian division obviously had a significant effect on the *Šiffīn* story moving forward, but the distinction in style was not insignificant, either. *Akhbārī* historians like al-Ya‘qūbī and al-Ṭabarī relied heavily on Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim for the sections on *Šiffīn* 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). *Mu‘arrikhī* writing, exemplified by al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Maqqdisī, 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 *isnāds* (with what they considered to be trustworthy transmitters and a chronologically and geographically plausible chain of transmittance). *Mu‘arrikhī* 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 *khobar* 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 *mu‘arrikhīs*’ stylistic conventions or their access to additional sources is that the *Šiffīn* 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.

¹³ Al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, pp. 334-336.

Too much must not be made of this distinction between *akhbārī* and *mu'arrikhī* historical writing. The *akhbārī-mu'arrikhī* 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 *mu'arrikhī*-style writing (and other styles, like biography) later on, there is no rigid “age of *akhbārīs*” that gives way to a rigid “age of *mu'arrikhīs*.” In the context of this study, further, such distinctions are potentially especially problematic. Al-Dīnawārī, for example, writes without *akhbār* and without *isnāds*; however, his section on Şifîn is otherwise nearly identical to excerpts lifted from Naşr ibn Muzāḥim. On the other side of the sectarian coin, Ibn al-Athīr is categorized in a similar situation: he writes a *mu'arrikhī*-style account, but is quite clearly dependent on al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rīkh 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 *khavar*, and Ibn al-Athīr as a *mu'arrikhī* because of his omission of them. The development of style has a general effect on the Şifîn story, but it is certainly not uniform or consistent.

Of greater consequence to the Şifîn 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 Şifîn story. It is after the earlier historians, al-Yaq'ūbī and al-Ṭabarī especially, that the sectarian slant of the Şifîn 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 Şifîn.

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 Şifîn. 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, Naşr 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 Şifîn (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-ʿĀş, and of the relative cowardice of the Syrian camp in comparison with the bravura of ʿAlī and the Iraqīs. It might also have reconsidered the righteousness of ʿAlī's cause; after all, for the Umayyads, it was not an

unreasonable suspicion that ‘Alī was complicit in ‘Uthmān’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 ‘Awāna 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 ‘Asākir, Ibn al-‘Adīm, 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-‘Abbasid context. Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim and the *akhbārī*, proto-Shī‘ī or Shī‘ī historians of Iraq clearly delighted in kicking the dead Umayyad horse; however, they also had a sectarian perspective they wished to reinforce. All the Iraqīs’ 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 ‘Alid claims. Al-Ya‘qūbī, for example, includes the following story of ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ, later Mu‘āwiya’s chief negotiator, as he asks his sons for advice on which side to join:

[‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ] called his two sons, Muḥammad and ‘Abd Allāh, and asked for their advice. ‘Abd Allāh said to him, “O Shaykh! Truly the Messenger of God died, and he was pleased with you; so, too, did Abū Bakr and ‘Umar 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 Mu‘āwiya, 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-Ya‘qūbī’s implication is that Mu‘āwiya is not fit to lead because of his worldliness and immorality. Another damning passage, one that will be repeated by the pro-‘Alid historians, appearing in Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī’s *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, seeks to disqualify Mu‘āwiya from leadership on legalistic grounds:

Abū Nūḥ came forward until he stopped between the two armies, and Dhū al-Kalā‘ went out to meet him. Then Abū Nūḥ said to him, “O Dhū al-Kalā‘! In both of these two armies, there is nobody who will give you better advice than I [because we are kin]. Truly, Mu‘āwiya 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 *ṭulaqā’*, 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 *bay‘a* from you. He is in error in his demand for blood revenge for ‘Uthmān, 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 ‘Uthmān’s blood. He is in error that he has blamed ‘Alī for ‘Uthmān’s blood, and he has dragged you into error with him, for you believe him and assist him.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, p. 183-4.

¹⁵ Ibn A‘tham, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, vol. 2., pp. 68-70.

One key point is that Mu'āwiya is one of the *ṭulaqā'*. The *ṭulaqā'* (the plural of *ṭaliq*) 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 (*ṭulaqā'*), but they and their descendants were forbidden from leadership. Ibn A'tham also attacks Mu'āwiya's case for fighting 'Alī, denouncing his claim to right of revenge for the murdered Caliph, 'Uthmān, by virtue of the fact that someone else (in this case, 'Uthmān's son, 'Amr ibn 'Uthmān) is a closer relation with a better claim. Starting with Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim, pro-'Alid 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 'Abbasid 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 'Abbasid period, the historiographical picture begins to change, and *mu'arrikhī*-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 *isnāds* 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 *khbar*, 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 *Waq'at Ṣiffīn* and towards large composite works and grand historical compilations whose scale was universal, like al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab*, whose work, composed a mere half century after al-Ya'qūbī's *Ta'rīkh*, was nonetheless quite different in style.

The historiographical trend during the times of the Shī'ī *mu'arrikhī* historians al-Mas'ūdī and al-Maḥdī, 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-Mas'ūdī and al-Maḥdī, 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 Shi‘ite 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 *mu‘arrikhī* style, was not entirely due to the simple invention of new material by writers who wrote accounts with *mu‘arrikhī* characteristics—that is, the absence of *isnāds* 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 Šiffīn that appeared in the Šiffīn story as early as the work of Našr ibn Muzāḥim was designed to honor notable descendants of the men named.¹⁹ The *mu‘arrikhī*-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 *isnāds* that unites the *mu‘arrikhī*-style historians; it is a fundamental and explicit concern with the nature of history.

These historians continued to rely heavily on the foundation text, *Waq‘at Šiffīn*, 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-Mas‘ūdī (d.345/956) and his *Murūj al-Dhahab* and al-Maqdisī (d. late 4th/10th c.) and his *Kitāb al-Bad‘ wa-al-Ta‘rīkh*, however, despite the difference in style relative to the *akhbārīs*, the general sectarian perspective of the story remains the same as the *akhbārīs*; Mu‘āwiya 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-Mas‘ūdī’s description of the battle for the water:

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

Al-Mas‘ūdī 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

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-Mas‘ūdī, *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 *isnāds* 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-Ta'rikh*, although the section presenting the Ṣiffīn story is essentially a *mu'arrikhī* style, *isnād*-free duplication of al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-al-Mulūk*, some significant omissions sympathetic to Mu'āwiya are notable. What follows is one example, from Ibn al-Athīr's description of the battle for the water, in which Mu'āwiya is totally absent from (and thus less culpable for?) the decision to forbid 'Alī's army access to the water.

Al-Walīd ibn 'Uqba and 'Abd Allāh ibn Sa'd said, "Deny them the water, as they denied it to Ibn 'Affān. Kill them thirsty, may God damn them!" 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ 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 'Abd Allāh ibn Sa'd 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 Mu'āwiya, that appeared in *akhbārī* sources as he could. Mu'āwiya's arguments rarely were given a voice; Ibn al-Athīr makes sure to elucidate Mu'āwiya's position at Ṣiffīn as clearly as he can.

Mu'āwiya praised God, and then said [to 'Alī'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 'Uthmān to us, so that we may kill them. Thus we answer you on the matter of 'obedience and community.'" Then Shabath ibn Rib'ī said, "Will it make you happy, O Mu'āwiya, that you will kill 'Ammār?" He said, "What do you mean by this? If you mean Ibn Samiyya, I would kill him in revenge for Natīl, the slave of 'Uthmān's."²⁴

The reference to 'Ammār ibn Yāsir (also Ibn Samiyya) hearkens to a famous ḥadīth in which the Prophet said that "the rebel band" (*al-fī'a al-bāghiya*) would kill 'Ammār, one of the earliest Muslims and most venerated of the Companions of the Prophet. The story of the death of 'Ammār ibn Yāsir appears in all versions of the Ṣiffīn story; the implication is usually that, since he died fighting for 'Alī, those who killed him—namely, the Syrians under Mu'āwiya—were previewed as "rebels" by the Prophet. Mu'āwiya'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-Ta'rikh*, v. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1998), pp. 634-5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 641-2.

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

By moving away from the *khobar* as the primary device through which to relate historical events, seeking instead to construct a more unified picture of Islamic history, al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Maḡdisī 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-Mas‘ūdī’s and al-Maḡdisī’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 Mu‘āwīya 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 ‘Alī’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-‘Alid and Shī‘ī historians who wrote in both the *akhbārī* style and the *mu‘arrikhī* 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 ‘Abbasid-era, Shī‘ī or ‘Alid-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 Mu‘āwīya’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 Mu‘āwīya’s complaints and ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ’ 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 Mu‘āwīya, while certainly not ubiquitous in ‘Abbasid 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-Shī‘ī sentiment.²⁵ According to Charles Pellat, Mu‘āwīya and the Umayyads became convenient symbols of opposition to ‘Alī, who was obviously the symbolic center of Shī‘ī sectarian arguments and claims about the imamate. Thus, it was not out of love for Mu‘āwīya, but rather hostility to emergent and developed Shī‘ism, that

²⁵ Tayeb El-Hibri, “The Redemption of Umayyad Memory by the ‘Abbāsids,” *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 ‘Abbasid sources tend to be ethical, rather than sectarian, in nature; he points out the common example of the pious Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (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 ‘Umar 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 Mu‘āwīya as well, saying that “despite his detrimental role in the first *fitna*, [Mu‘āwīya] continues to hold the keys for some important virtues—patience, forbearance (*ḥilm*), generosity, and political wisdom, to name but a few.”²⁸ Such sympathetic ‘Abbasid 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 *jamā‘ī-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 Mu‘āwīya and ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās (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 ‘Abbāsīd caliphs, who drew their legitimacy by their descent from him). This collection is among those texts sympathetic to Mu‘āwīya explored by Aram Shahin;³⁰ Shahin points out that none of the works (all of which are monographs on Mu‘āwīya) amounts to a biography of Mu‘āwīya, but rather they seek to praise his merits or condemn his shortcomings. Shahin’s study amply demonstrates that Mu‘āwīya was a subject of intense interest and debate in his own right, irrespective of Ṣiffīn. The development of certain sympathies towards Mu‘āwīya, often as a symbol of opposition to ‘Alī and the developing Shī‘ī 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 ‘Abbasid 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 ‘Abbasid power also meant a decline in ‘Abbasid 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 Mu‘āwīya was a two-sided coin, however; Shī‘īs or proto-Shī‘īs could also emphasize Mu‘āwīya’s villainy even

²⁶ Charles Pellat, “Le culte de Mu‘āwīya au IIIe siècle de l’hégire,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 6 (1956), p. 65.

²⁷ El-Hibri, “The Redemption of Umayyad Memory by the ‘Abbasids,” p. 242. See also Chase F. Robinson, *‘Abd al-Malik* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005); R. Stephen Humphreys, *Mu‘āwīya ibn Abi Sufyan* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); and see Nancy Khalek, “Early Islamic History Reimagined: The Biography of ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz,” forthcoming in *Journal of African and Oriental Studies*, 2014, for a relevant discussion of ‘Umar II’s treatment in *Ta’rīkh 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 Mu‘āwīya ibn Abī Sufyān: Treatises and Monographs on Mu‘āwīya 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-Mas‘ūdī and al-Maḡdisī.

For the *mu‘arrikhī*-style writers Ibn al-Athīr and Ibn Kathīr, and for Ibn ‘Asākir and Ibn al-‘Adīm, 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 *Waq‘at 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 *Waq‘at 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 architecture³¹—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 Muzaḥim 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 *Ta‘rīkh 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 ‘Asākir and Ibn al-‘Adīm—sought to do for Damascus and Aleppo, respectively, what al-Khāṭib al-Baghdādī had done for Baghdad, with the collections *Ta‘rīkh Madīnat Dimashq* of Ibn ‘Asākir and *Bughyat al-Ṭalab fī Ta‘rīkh Ḥalab* of Ibn al-‘Adīm.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 ‘Asākir’s *Ta‘rīkh 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.

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 fī al-Ta‘rīkh*, began a biographical dictionary entitled *Ta‘rīkh 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 ‘Asākir and then, a generation later, Ibn al-‘Adīm 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 ‘Asākir’s life, the Sunnī reaction to the Shī‘ī 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 ‘Asākir’s patron) had emerged as the clear leader of Syria, persecution of Shī‘īs (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 ‘Asākir 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 (*fadā’il*)” 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, Şifīn is an event of mediocre import, at best. Ibn ‘Asākir’s section on Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān, for example, where one might expect to find a wealth of information about Şifīn, 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 Şifīn 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 Mu‘āwiya’s case, as is the case with many of the men listed who fought at Şifīn, his presence at Şifīn was noted, and perhaps briefly discussed, but it is not Şifīn alone, or even primarily, that gives him his reputation; rather, it is his subsequent rule. Many of the references to Şifīn in these books are merely statements that a given individual was with ‘Alī at Şifīn, or witnessed the day of Şifīn with Mu‘āwiya, or was killed at Şifīn, 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 *mu‘arrikhī* 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 Şifīn 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, Şifīn, while remaining an

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 ‘Asākir and Nur al-Din, see Suleiman Mourad and James Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in the Crusader Period: Ibn ‘Asākir of Damascus (1105–1176) and His Age; with an edition and translation of Ibn ‘Asākir’s The Forty Hadiths for Inciting Jihad* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2013).

³⁷ James E. Lindsay, “Ibn ‘Asākir, His *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq* and its Usefulness for Understanding Early Islamic History,” in James E. Lindsay, ed., *Ibn ‘Asākir 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 Şifḫīn 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 Şifḫīn 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 ‘Asākir is a much more preeminent figure in the history of Syrian historiography, the most relevant example of how the Şifḫīn story could be used for the purpose of rehabilitation in the context of the biographical dictionary form belongs to Ibn al-‘Adīm. Through his discussion of the death of ‘Ammār ibn Yāsir, the elderly and well-respected Companion of the Prophet who fought for ‘Alī at Şifḫīn, he emphasizes that the Syrians were “rebels” against the rightful imamate of ‘Alī 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-‘Adīm’s discussion of Şifḫīn:

I read in the Book of Şifḫīn which was compiled by Abū Ja‘far Muḫammad ibn Khālīd al-Hāshimī,³⁸ known by the name of his mother, who said on the authority of ...Abū Şādiq: The Messenger of God (God’s prayers and peace be upon him) said that “three nations will come to Şifḫīn. 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 ‘Alī and the companions of Mu‘āwiya. In this story, the two parties came from his *umma*, and neither of them ever ceased to be within the *umma* of [Muḫammad] (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

³⁸ This is the same Abū Ja‘far mentioned by Eddé in “Les Sources de L’Histoire Omeyyade Dans L’œuvre d’Ibn al-‘Adīm.” All that is known of him is his name.

³⁹ Ibn al-‘Adīm, *Bughya*, vol. 1, p. 291. The nation “in the right” is, of course, ‘Alī’s party; the nation “in error” is Mu‘āwiya’s; and the apostates are the Khawārij.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 294. Ibn al-‘Adīm, does, however, single out the Khawārij as having become apostates at Şifḫīn.

‘Abd al-Wāḥid ibn Abī ‘Awn said, “‘Alī 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 ‘Alī said, “And he is a believer today.”⁴¹

Sa’d ibn Ibrāhīm said, “‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib went out that day with ‘Adī ibn Ḥātim al-Ṭā’ī, and they came upon one of his dead kinsmen who had been killed by one of ‘Alī’s companions. ‘Adī said, “O woe for this one, for yesterday he was a Muslim and today he is a *kāfir!*” Then ‘Alī said, “No, he was a believer yesterday, and he remains a believer today.”⁴²

Ibn al-‘Adīm’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 Mu‘āwiya had, by his error in opposing ‘Alī, effectively abandoned Islam and led his people into apostasy, somebody (probably an Shī‘ī) had made such charges, and Ibn al-‘Adīm felt compelled to respond. While it is also possible that Ibn al-‘Adīm 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-‘Adīm 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 ‘Abbasids took power. Even so, Ibn al-‘Adīm 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-‘Adīm’s treatment of the battle.⁴³

None of the pro-‘Alid historical sources examined in this study ever makes an explicit charge of apostasy against Mu‘āwiya. Furthermore, if it was universally held that Mu‘āwiya was a *bāghī*, a rebel, and not a *murtadd*, an apostate, Ibn al-‘Adīm would likely not have chosen to spend such energy defending Mu‘āwiya 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-‘Adīm’s lifetime. In the context of that debate, it is certain that the charge of apostasy against Mu‘āwiya appeared somewhere, likely in Shī‘ī-composed legal texts concerning the imamate, and Ibn al-‘Adīm felt compelled to respond to it. The question that arises, then, is whether Ibn al-‘Adīm’s enterprise to defend the Syrians in his *Bughyat al-Ṭalab fi Ta’rīkh Ḥalab* was more motivated by his Syrianness or his fervent Sunnism. Both were obviously motivating factors. His orthodox Sunnism, however ardently believed, shaped the

⁴¹ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 295.

⁴² Ibid., vol. 1, p. 298-9.

⁴³ A treatise of Ibn Taymiyya, *Su’āl fi Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān Raḍiya Allāh ‘anh*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1979), explicitly defends Mu‘āwiya against charges of apostasy, and concludes instead that Mu‘āwiya was a *bāghī*, a rebel. In fact, the matter of baghy in Islamic law had developed slowly, and reached a critical point by the time Ibn al-‘Adīm 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 Mu‘āwiya and Şiffīn. 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-‘Adīm’s defense of the Syrians at Şiffīn a step further. Writing stylistically like the *mu‘arrikhīs*, he does not go so far as to criticize ‘Alī 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-Ash‘arī and ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ, 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 ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ’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 *Waq‘at Şiffīn*, with the obvious exception of the commentary at the very end.

‘Amr 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, Mu‘āwiya, for he is the *walī* of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, the claimant of his blood, and the most righteous of the people in his position!” For ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ 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 Mu‘āwiya out of necessity, as *ijtihād* confirms and holds true. It is said that Abū Mūsā spoke to him uncouthly, and that ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ answered in kind.⁴⁴

This event—in which ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ tricked Abū Mūsā into speaking first, and then denied their agreement after Abū Mūsā had announced they had agreed to depose ‘Alī from the office of the Caliph—had been the most universally derided episode at Şiffīn in all of the histories heretofore examined. As a Syrian, it is not surprising to see Ibn Kathīr expressing a soft spot for Mu‘āwiya and his cause, as did Ibn al-Athīr, Ibn ‘Asākir and Ibn al-‘Adīm, although he had, before this point, been careful to avoid expressing anything overt to that effect. Perhaps it is simply the Iraqī regionalism, Shī‘ism, Shī‘ī sympathy, or at the very least, pro-‘Alidism, of most of the earlier Arab historians, but it is only here that ‘Amr’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 Şiffīn, 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 Şiffīn through the medium of historical writing, or whether he simply

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 272.

borrowed directly from some missing piece of *Ta'rikh 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 Mu'āwiya 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 Siffin 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 Siffin. The decision to bar 'Alī 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 Mu'āwiya and the Syrians early in the Siffin narrative. 'Amr'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. 'Amr's deception spelled the beginning of 'Alī's political downfall and marked the beginning of the rise of Mu'āwiya's caliphate and the Umayyad dynasty's reign; one need look no further than the fact that 'Alī was and is considered by posterity the very last of the *rāshidūn*, the rightly-guided caliphs (with the occasional exception of the pious Umayyad, 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz), to understand what a falling off Islamic posterity perceives in the transition to Mu'āwiya 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 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ and Abū Mūsā could come to no agreement regarding the Qur'ān's guidance in settling the matter, Ibn Kathīr argues that 'Amr 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 Mu'āwiya lest the community be without a leader to be obeyed. 'Alī had implicitly abdicated (or, at least, his appointed arbiter had actively caused him to abdicate against his wishes), and Mu'āwiya, to the minds of both 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ 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

Şiffīn 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 Şiffīn, 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 Şiffīn, 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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