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Linking Information, Creating a Legend
The Desert March of Khālid b. al-Walīd

By Ryan Lynch

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The early Arabic historical tradition includes a significant amount of material which covers the early Islamic conquests of the mid-seventh century CE, the period in which the new Islamic polity came to rule over much of the modern-day Middle East. This material which concerns the conquest period is classified as futūḥ and, at its basest, concerns itself with the how, why, and when of Islamic success over outside forces during this period. Featuring prominently within this genre are the accounts of the Muslim conquest of Arabia, Syria and Iraq, the events with which the figure of Khālid b. al-Walīd is deeply entwined. Among the most famous and oft-cited stories about Khālid involves his desert march from Mesopotamia to Greater Syria during the conquest of those regions, a tale with far more context behind it than modern scholars have previously considered.

The use of the early Arabic material to reconstruct the earliest centuries of Islamic history is a deeply problematic endeavor, and one that has been well documented over this last century. First and foremost, the texts which have survived to the modern period post-date the events they purport to describe by some 150+ years at best. To make their use even more problematic, the accounts contained within these texts often present contradictions and/or depict extremely romanticized versions of events. This has left those modern scholars seeking to use these sources to reconstruct “what really happened” in the early Islamic period perplexed, as many have attempted to separate the kernels of historicity from the literary embellishment – the “wheat from the chaff.” The desert march of Khālid has earned the attention of these source-critical historical efforts, which have attempted to group multiple traditions together in order to better understand his “actual route.”

1) A note on references: when available, translated forms of primary sources are given as the primary page number, while pages appearing in parentheses refer to the corresponding page in the Arabic editions listed in the bibliography.
2) Here, I use Fred Donner’s classification of what he suggests is one of four approaches to early Arabic historical sources that have been utilized by modern scholars. With this approach, Donner writes that “…it was assumed that the extant narrative sources included much accurate early historical material, but that this reliable material was intermixed with unreliable material,” going on to say that adopters of this approach believe that once-reliable material had become corrupted through years of transmission, or that these sources included “…tendentious or popular material originally written not by early Muslim historians, but by ‘storytellers,’ or by purveyors of ‘historical novels…” Fred M. Donner, Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1998), 9.
Linking Information, Creating a Legend

There are some working in the field who have looked to answer different questions utilizing the narrative material which survives, however, and it is to this methodological approach that the present paper belongs. The literary form of the works themselves can tell us much about the approach of a compiler to the material which he uses, and can provide insight into the development of the early Arabic historical tradition and the role of the author in this process. In particular, the works of Stefan Leder and Steven Judd have established how later authors could manipulate their source material in specific instances to serve a narrative purpose, demonstrating that materials transmitted from elsewhere could be embellished, omitted, or reorganized into a form that served the purpose of the author.\(^3\) Tayeb El-Hibri has also used these early narrative sources to demonstrate the role that anecdotal accounts could play in transmitting information the later ninth- and tenth-century CE authors wanted to communicate to their audience.\(^4\) In this way, the stories and characters of the foundational period of Islam could serve as a recognizable mouthpiece for the doctrine and belief important to these later authors.

The desert march of Khālid is one such event which bears the fingerprints of historical development – of attempts by authors to create a singular narrative from fragments of social memory. The story of his desert march can be viewed as a literary construct employed by certain Muslim authors who were attempting to cope with contradicting accounts which remembered Khālid as the conqueror of their town or region. Whether Khālid was actually responsible for the significant number of conquests his name is ascribed to in the later histories is uncertain and, perhaps, unlikely.\(^5\) Certain towns and regions may have simply attributed their conquest to the name of the famous general at a later date in order to earn a certain degree of prestige through association. But if this material was well-embedded within the historical memory of these locations by the time compilers began the process of recording it, they would have been forced to create a narrative from material that had a very independent nature. In order to rectify these discrepancies and conflicting accounts, the grandiose desert march was employed, further aggrandizing the legacy of Khālid while tightly linking the conquest of Syria and Iraq into one flowing narrative. It is a tale which would have excited and entertained as a form of *samar*, “stories apt of being told at evening conversations.”\(^6\) But more importantly, it promoted the goal by later Muslim

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5) Patricia Crone has argued that Khālid’s role in Iraq is all together unlikely, citing that non-Arabic sources seem to contradict or have no memory of Khālid’s presence there. The Armenian chronicle attributed to Sebeos doesn’t record the Arabs sending soldiers to Iraq until after the conquest of Syria was well under way, and the Khūzistānī Chronicle only records Khālid as the conqueror of Syria. Patricia Crone, “Khālid b. al-Walīd,” Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition.

authors of presenting the greater Islamic conquests as a well-calculated, singular affair.

Khālid b. al-Walīd is remembered in the Arabic tradition as a Companion of the Prophet Muḥammad. He was already an established military commander by the time he converted to Islam in the early 630s CE, shortly before Muḥammad’s successful conquest of Mecca in western Arabia. The sources record him as being engaged in warfare on behalf of the new Islamic state under Muḥammad, the first Caliph Abū Bakr, and his successor, ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb before his death in 642CE/23AH. He played an active role in the consolidation of Muslim power in the Arabian Peninsula before serving as one of the chief military commanders of the conquest of both Syria and Iraq, and the memory of his role in the conquest of regions even stretches as far as south-western Iran.7

The desert march itself is recorded as having taken place during the year 634CE/12AH. Khālid’s army is said to have been sent by the Caliph Abū Bakr following the Ridda wars, or “wars of apostasy,” to begin the conquest of Iraq, whereupon the commanders in Syria sent a call to the Caliph for reinforcements. These reinforcements materialized in the form of Khālid and his Iraqi army, who are said to have crossed to Bilād al-Shām from Iraq directly, thus braving an extremely inhospitable desert. The details of the event vary significantly between transmitters and authors, however, and modern scholarship has done a great deal to muddle the affair by attempting to reconcile these numerous accounts. These reconciliation attempts have hoped to make sense of reports that trace the movements of Khālid’s reinforcements before, during, and after his desert march. In this epic tale, Khālid and his army are said to have completed the journey of several days’ march across expansive desert without watering places. It was a journey that would have been especially difficult for an army of any size, including the 500-800 men that some sources purport were with him.8 Ibn A’tham goes even further, suggesting that Khālid’s army numbered at least 7,000 – all with horses.9 In these varying accounts, Khālid’s army is reported to have traveled between Qurāqir in Mesopotamia and Suwā in Syria, or from Qurāqir moving northward before crossing the desert and arriving at Tadmur (Palmyra).10

The essence of the tale is that Khālid was unfamiliar with the route needed to be taken, and was guided by Rāfī‘ b. ‘Amīra al-Ṭā‘ī over the five days necessary for the journey.11 Khālid and Rāfī‘ starved the camels of water for several days before giv-

7) A later fourteenth century reference by the famed travel writer Ibn Battūta, for instance, mentions that the city of Tustar, modern Shūshtar in Khūzistān province, remembered Khālid specifically as the conqueror of the region. Ibn Battūta, Riḥla, ed. Ṭalāl Ḥarb (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub, 1987), 209.
11) al-Azdī, 63. al-Ṭabarī, Challenge to the Empires, 124 (2122-2123); Ibn A’tham, 136.
ing them all the water they were able to drink. Then, the camels’ mouths were sealed closed—al-Balādhurī recounts that the camels had spears thrust into their lips which were left to drag, while al-Azdī and al-Ṭabarī say they had their mouths sowed shut. As the journey went on and with the water supply brought by Khālid’s army exhausted, a number of camels were slaughtered each day: their meat used to feed portions of the army, and the water held in their stomachs to provide drink. In the end, Khālid’s army successfully arrived in Syria and ambushed the men of Ḥurqūṣ b. al-Nu‘mān of the tribe Quḍā’a, and several authors record the following poem:

“Praise to Rāfī‘, how he has successfully made, from Qurāqir to Suwā, the desert passage. If the army march five days they fade; before you no human had crossed it to my knowledge.”

The epic nature of this trek by Khālid is striking, and can be argued as one of the most romantic accounts associated within tales of the general. The story itself has been rightly scrutinized by Patricia Crone, however, who took issue not only with the route reportedly taken by Khālid’s army, but with Khālid’s role in Iraq prior to his arrival in Syria. This is a point worth more closely dissecting.

When Abū Bakr’s message is said to arrive to Khālid in Iraq, he had already been involved in major engagements against Sasanian forces. The order of these events recorded in al-Ṭabarī is a target of Crone’s criticism of the story, which says that Khālid had engaged in large battles in a number of locations throughout Mesopotamia including at al-Walaja, al-Ḥīra, al-Anbār, and ‘Ayn al-Ṭamr, before being bizarrely sent back to northern Arabia to Dūmat al-Jandal. al-Ṭabarī notes that Khālid had been sent there previously during the lifetime of the Prophet, and this additional trek is likely a separate attempt by the compiler to rectify the multiple stories of the events there, including one confusing story that its leader had fled to al-Ḥīra and named a construction there Dūma after his previous locale. After successfully

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12) al-Balādhurī, 169 (131); al-Azdī, 63; al-Ṭabarī, Challenge to the Empires, 124 (2122-2123).
15) In another account of al-Ṭabarī, Khālid is sent here again after he has received the order to travel to Syria but before he has begun his march there. al-Ṭabarī, Challenge to the Empires, 113 (2112).
16) The events at Dūmat al-Jandal are a particularly excellent example of the differences, and at times contradictory nature, of many reports in Early Islamic history. Ibn Ishāq in his Sīra recalls that Khālid was sent to Dūmat al-Jandal following the raid on Tabūk in the year 631CE/9AH, which was ruled by Ukaydir b. ‘Abd al-Malik. Khālid is said to have brought Ukaydir to the Prophet along with a garment covered in gold that he was wearing, killing Ukaydir’s brother in the meanwhile. The Prophet spared his life in exchange for the payment of the poll-tax, and no conversion by Ukaydir is mentioned. Al-Balādhurī includes multiple accounts simultaneously from several different transmitters of varying details: that Ukaydir was attacked by the Prophet in the year 626CE/5AH, later sending Khālid against him in 631CE/9AH; that Ukaydir had converted upon being brought before the Prophet by Khālid; that Ukaydir simply agreed to taxation
resolving the situation in North Arabia, he is said to have returned to al-Hira where he began plans to capture the Sasanian capital at al-Madā’in (Ctesiphon).\(^{17}\) The narrative of al-Ṭabarī is so outlandish to even include an account that after Khālid had returned to al-Hira from Dūmat al-Jandal, he then went out to Mecca for a “secret” pilgrimage in 634CE/12AH before returning to al-Hira again, where “his punishment was that he was sent to Syria.”\(^{18}\) All of this makes for an unlikely account of events, not only from the logistical standpoint of when and where large armies should move, but from the chronological standpoint of just how much time would have needed to pass for all of these events to be coordinated.

Al-Ṭabarī purports that all of this occurred within a year, from March 633CE – March 634CE/12AH, and specifically informs us that Khālid was sent to Iraq in Muharram of the year 12 (18 March-16 April 633CE).\(^{19}\) To add to the problem within these accounts of the conquest of Iraq, there is a typical conquest topos of letter-writing between Khālid, his fellow field commanders, and the Caliph Abū Bakr in Medina. Within this topos, the field commanders are reportedly in constant communication with the Caliph, who confirms or assists with most major decisions. This included everything from battle tactics to the surrender agreements made with cities once conflict had passed, and especially with regards to requests for reinforcements.\(^{20}\) The precursor to the formal barid, or postal system, which was purportedly in use during this period, would not have been able to provide the near-instantaneous response times that conquest accounts often suggest between Caliph and commander, particularly when one considers that the distance between Medina and Iraq is some 1000 kilometers, or a 20-days journey.\(^{21}\) The result of all of this is an extremely impractical narrative of when brought to the Prophet; that Ukaydir converted and was given an agreement for Dūma; that Ukaydir converted, was given an agreement, and violated the agreement as soon as the Prophet died, fleeing to al-Hira and setting up a “new” Dūma there. Al-Ṭabarī includes a report on the authority of Ibn Ishāq that Khālid was sent by the Prophet to bring him Ukaydir, where Khālid killed Ukaydir’s brother and took Ukaydir and the gold garment worn by his brother to the Prophet, where he Ukaydir agreed to taxation. Al-Ṭabarī later includes a report of Khālid returning to Dūmat al-Jandal and engaging with forces there. Ukaydir refused to fight him, before he was captured by Khālid’s men, and Khālid had him beheaded. It is particularly worth noting that in both Ibn Hishām’s recension of Ibn Ishāq’s Sīrat al-Muḥammad wa al-Ṭabarī’s related citations from Ibn Ishāq, the simple detail of whom the gold garment belonged to is conspicuously different. Ibn Ishāq, The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 607-608. al-Balādhurī, 95-97 (73-74). al-Ṭabarī, The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume IX: The Last Years of the Prophet, trans. Ismail K. Poonawala (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 58-59 (1702) and Challenge to the Empires, 57-58 (2065).

\(^{17}\) al-Ṭabarī, Challenge to the Empires, 19-61 (2033-2068).

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 68 (2075).

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 2 (2016).

\(^{20}\) For more on the uses and reasons for correspondence between commanders and their leaders as a topos, see Nicola Clarke, The Muslim Conquest of Iberia: Medieval Arabic Narratives (London: Routledge, 2012), 129-131.

\(^{21}\) Adam Silverstein discusses the manner in which messages could be sent in the pre-Umayyad Islamic realm. He convincingly demonstrates not only the pre-Islamic etymological origins of the word, but how the system was likely to have actually been used in this early period. Nonetheless, I tend to favor the interpretation of Albrecht Noth and Lawrence Conrad – which Silverstein labels the “skeptical approach” - which treats the constant mentions of correspondence over massive distance in the narrative sources as extremely unrealistic. Adam Silverstein, “A Neglected Chapter in the History of Caliphal State-Building,” Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 30 (2005), 303-306. Albrecht Noth and Lawrence I. Conrad, The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source Critical Study, trans. Michael Bonner (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1994), 78.
Khālid’s movements and role in Iraq, which begs the question of why it was presented this way at all.

All of this culminates with the creation of Khālid’s great desert march. The march represents an attempt by the authors to present the conquests of both Iraq and Syria in a cohesive way; the conquests were not simply the result of Arab tribes venturing out from Arabia in all directions without any central authority, these authors suggest, but they were a closely coordinated and highly organized effort. Whether this portrays the historical reality of the situation is unlikely, not least because of the great problems involving distance, but also due to the nature of the tribal system which had defined Arab society for centuries.22 The story of Khālid presents a united effort with regard to the conquests of both Iraq and Syria. His summons to Syria bridges the accounts of both conquests, as he is one of the only major figures presented as heavily involved in what later authors wished to present as a common invasion. That there are so many separate accounts, differences, and contradictions within these limited early sources considered here as to where he was and how he traveled to Syria suggests the problems of many separate, local traditions attaching their history to that of Khālid. How, then, could so many accounts and stories of be sewed together in a cohesive narrative within a written form?

Suleiman Mourad has also suggested that the story of the desert march was a fabrication, but argues the event was created using three brief poems as its basis. Namely, he cites the poem of Rāfi’ above and another short poem as being emploted in the narrative at the point of Khālid’s departure from Syria. Both the first poem above and a slightly longer version of it (eight lines instead of four) fail to mention Khālid or an army, referencing only Rāfi’ and his desert crossing, leading Mourad to suggest it was an earlier creation. The third poem, Mourad proposes, was far more likely a tradition shifted from Khālid’s role in the Ridda wars in Arabia. This is clear, he suggests, as the poet would not have known of the coming of Khālid, especially by a path that no one had before taken:

“Pour me more wine before the arrival of the army of Abū Bakr,  
For our death is near, though to us unknown.  
I see the horses of the Muslims and Khālid  
Attacking us before the crack of dawn.”23

22) The Arabic sources largely suggest that the vast majority of problems between tribes was largely put aside during the conquests, and that no Arab-Muslim tribe acted independently of the Caliph. Prior to the arrival of Islam, Arabian society had been delineated along tribal boundaries, where kinship was of integral importance, and inter-tribal relations ebbed-and-flowed. Raiding and violence – particularly vendettas - between tribes was a long-standing practice, and problematic enough that the Qur’ān itself addresses the issue a number of times. The narrative sources on the early period of Islam, however, suggest that the success of Muhammad’s prophetic career united much of the long-fractured Arabian tribes. Those who had earlier chosen to resist Muhammad’s message or turn away from Islam following his death were largely brought to Islam during the Ridda wars in the reign of Abū Bakr. Thereafter, the sources present an extremely united front for the bulk of the conquest period.
23) al-Balādhurī, 170 (131); Poem translated by Mourad, Poetry, 178-179, 186.
This argument is unconvincing, however. That the speaker seems to have foresight of the danger ahead is not something unique to early Islamic historical material, nor to *futūḥ* literature itself. There are many other instances where characters foretell impending doom, including several surrounding the Battle of al-Qādisiyah: the Persian king Yazdegerd III senses a bad omen at the coming of an Arab delegation prior to the battle, and the Persian general Rustam b. Farrukhzād perceives the danger of the Arab army and counsels caution, before later having a dream foretelling his army’s inevitable defeat. Furthermore, there is no reason why this poem couldn’t be a later construction exalting the feat of Khālid and the plight of the unbeliever against an army inspired by God.

Regarding the first poem, Mourad’s position that the poem’s writing pre-dated the construction of the desert march and was emplotted in the narrative of Khālid when he needed to be quickly moved from Iraq to Syria seems likely. Rāfī’’s tribe, living on the edge of the desert, likely had a tradition of a famous ancestor who’s hardiness and prestige were demonstrated through these particular verses. When later authors had begun compiling the regional traditions of the conquest period, this pre-existing poem was adopted, as it assisted in providing the means with which to bring Khālid and his army to Syria. Thus, in some accounts of the desert march, and in particular the account of al-Balādhurī which specifically utilizes this poem, Rāfī’’s role is central. In another, however, he is left completely in the wake of the heroic depiction of Khālid. Guides tell the Muslim general that they knew “only a route which does not bear armies, which the lone rider takes,” and it is only through a rousing speech that Khālid motivates the very fearful Rāfī’ to guide him.

Traditionists in both regions would have been aware of the other region’s claim to Khālid, so it was left to the historians to develop a strategy to reconcile these claims to his presence. The fingerprints of this attempt can still be seen, however, in the numerous vignettes that provide reasons as to why Khālid was sent to Syria: in one instance, as mentioned above, this is as punishment for his “secret pilgrimage;” in most, however, it comes as a form of agreement between Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, as reinforcements were needed for the armies in Syria. The sources show recognition...

26) This is most clearly evinced in the account of al-Azdī, where early on Khālid is engaged in the conquests of Iraq when he receives Abū Bakr’s request to reinforce and take command of the armies in Syria. Scant little information is known about the figure of the author, but Mourad suggests that he was likely an Iraqi from Basra, possibly living and working in Kūfa. If we accept this and Nancy Khalek’s suggestion that the text is representative of and engaging with the Syrian tradition, al-Azdī demonstrates that the there was a mutual claim to a portion of conquest by Khālid. Suleiman A. Mourad, “On Early Islamic Historiography: Abū Ismā’īl al-Azdī and His *Futūḥ al-Shām*,“ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120, No. 4 (2000), 577-593; Nancy Khalek, *Damascus After the Muslim Conquest: Text and Image in Early Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54.
that this move from Iraq to Syria would limit the glory attained by Khālid.\(^{27}\) The latter’s reaction to being sent to Syria from Iraq is nearly identical across transmitters: summed up in the account of al-Azdī, Khālid rips the letter from Abū Bakr upon reading it, saying “This is the work of ‘Umar; he envies me that God conquers Iraq by my hands.”\(^{28}\) Wrapped in a form of “understanding” between the two Caliphs over these separate armies supporting each other in conquering the lands, the justification for Khālid’s shift from Iraq to Syria is explained. What came next was the practical issue: how he would get there with the men necessary to support the armies already in Bilād al-Shām.

In order to do this, the tradition of the desert march was created, further adding to the reputation of Khālid within the narrative while allowing his army to arrive in Syria with complete surprise. In doing so, it justified Khālid’s dual role as the commander who began the conquests in Iraq before quickly being moved to participate in almost every major conflict within Greater Syria. The systemization of this narrative tradition is careful, too, in ensuring that Khālid is not given too much credit for his role in Iraq, couching the reasoning for this in terms of the ongoing feud between ‘Umar and Khālid. Thus, Khālid begins his plans for the conquest of the Sasanian royal capital at al-Madā’in in the narrative of al-Ṭabarī before being prevented from doing so by the decision of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar to recall him to Syria. This move, if successful, would have meant the collapse of Sasanian power and resistance, and the conquest of the region; something which was reserved for the subsequent commanders in Iraq at the battle of al-Qādisiyya, and in particular, Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ.\(^{29}\)

The issue of timing is further exasperated by the traditions which have Khālid continuing to engage in battles and conquests while on his trek to Syria. This has resulted in a great many issues for modern scholars hoping to identify the exact route taken by his army, with several theories having been put forward consisting, primarily, of a discussion over a “southern” or shorter “northern” route: between Qurāqir and Suwā via Dūmat al-Jandal, and between Qurāqir and Palmyra by a path of conquest along the Euphrates river.\(^{30}\) Rectifying these conflicting accounts is likely an impossible task with the information available. The suggestion that the desert march was

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27) There are fewer commanders and armies listed as present in Iraq in this period than the many remembered in Syria, therefore meaning that the glory of the conquest of the region would have been left to Khālid, along with the distribution of its great wealth.


29) This fits in with the representation within futūḥ literature of a few major, decisive events resulting in significant, conclusive change. This is opposed to the more realistic – and less entertaining – story of a great number of small skirmishes and lingering resistance following the fall of a capital city. Instead, following a decisive battle and the fall of the capital, power in a region is broken. For more on the “decisive battle” topos specifically, see Noth and Conrad, 129-132.

merely a literary device utilized by some of the authors to explain Khālid being in so many places in such a short period of time is worth considering, however, especially because of these contradictions in possible routes. If an oral tradition was alive and thriving prior to its commitment to writing, it is reasonable to believe that local communities had long-remembered and developed traditions of the arrival of Muslim armies during the conquests. At the very least, the great amount of fūtūḥ material which has survived or is referenced in surviving written accounts from the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries testifies to a seemingly established interest in the stories of the Companions and the conquests. Whether Khālid was actually involved in the conquest of all of the cities, towns, and regions that remember him as conqueror seems highly unlikely. Nonetheless, once this information was collected by transmitters and was subsequently brought together for consolidation in a written form, the result was the conflicting reports which exist across these works.

There is also a greater problem for modern scholarship’s consideration of the desert march. This is the assumption that anytime Khālid’s departure to Syria is discussed, it is immediately grouped with the accounts of the more substantial “desert march,” implying that all mentions of him going to Syria were a reference to this arduous desert journey. In these additional accounts, the presence of the guide Rāfi’, the plan to fill the camels’ stomachs of water, and the details of the length and difficulty of the journey are not mentioned at all, with simple phrases left to modern interpretation. These include statements following the request from Abū Bakr to travel to Syria such as: “and so Khālid fulfilled that” (fā-nafadha Khālid li-dhālik); “and he set out, and so he crossed the desert from Qurāqir to Suwā’” (wa-sāra fā-fawwaza min Qurāqir ilā Suwā’); “and Khālid set out in the direction of Syria” (wa-sāra Khālid nahuw al-Shām); “and he set out with guides until he came to Dūmat al-Jandal” (wa-sāra bi-al-adillā’ ḥattā nazala Dūmat al-Jandal). This is the greatest elaboration these accounts receive regarding Khālid’s journey. In all of these instances, the closest mention of the desert march is the use of the verb fawwaza (to cross the desert) in one account of al-Ṭabarī, at least mentioning that Khālid traveled by crossing the desert, and the statement by Ibn Sa’d that he utilized a guide. In this latter instance, however, there is no explicit mention of crossing the desert. Beyond that, however, the claims in previous work by modern scholars that all of the above mentioned accounts reference or are related to the “epic” march by Khālid to Iraq are extremely tendentious. It is certainly worth highlighting, too, that among all of the stories Ibn Sa’d chose to include in his biographical work on the Companions, Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr, regarding Khālid’s

32) al-Ṭabarī, Challenge to the Empires, 86 (2089).
33) Ibid., 109 (2109).
35) Ibn Sa’d, 121.
36) Although al-Ṭabarī includes both this brief mention and the more elaborate desert march story on the authority of his two separate primary transmitters: Sayf b. ‘Umar, and Ibn Isḥāq. Interestingly, Sayf has been deeply criticized by many modern scholars for his overly-romanticized and seemingly unrealistic accounts of the conquests, but here it is Ibn Isḥāq who is reported to have transmitted the story of the desert march. al-Ṭabarī, Challenge to the Empires, 86 (2089), 122-126 (2121-2125).
exploits, there is no mention of the desert march at all, other than to say he went from Iraq to Syria. Similarly, while the account within the history of al-Ya'qūbī is far briefer than the other consulted sources, there is not a single mention of Khālid crossing the desert or of guides. While it is possible that these are all referring to a similar, grandiose desert march as the one suggested by the presence of Rāfī’ and the water-filled camels, this is by no means a certain connection, and the discrepancies over the many locations that Khālid does or does not conquer in the varying accounts would suggest that the grand account is, in fact, literary elaboration employed by some authors.

The danger of entering in a long desert march without water was well known to generations of Arabs prior to the earliest Islamic historical writings, and is attested to both in pre-Islamic and Umayyad era poetry.\(^{37}\) A tale which included the danger of taking a huge portion of an army and then immediately engaging the enemy successfully upon arrival was exciting, fitting in immediately with the themes of Arab tradition within the travel ode. The tale utilized a setting that was already a part of an established vocabulary which would have further empowered the narrative in the minds of the audience. It is another tale of the fortitude of the Muslim warrior in overcoming adversity and overwhelming odds with the support of God, in a style not dissimilar to the plentiful tales of massive armies of non-Muslims being bested by a minuscule force of Muslim opponents.

Thus, the impressive desert march included in the works of al-Azdī, al-Balādhurī, Ibn A‘tham and in certain accounts within al-Ṭabarī’s, was likely no more than a literary device which served the useful purpose of quickly getting Khālid’s experienced army of reinforcements to the aid of Muslim commanders in Syria. It helped the authors create a cohesive narrative structure from significant and often conflicting independent historical traditions. It also served an important purpose in tying two separate, regional historical traditions together, a literary ploy meant to bind these two quite separate and simultaneous events into one cohesive, flowing narrative. In doing so, the audience is presented with an important theme the medieval authors wanted to portray regarding the early period of conquest: that the conquests demonstrated a deep level of organization and control on behalf of the Caliph over commanders and armies regarding battles, troop movement, and other important aspects such as surrender and taxation agreements.\(^{38}\)

The audience is also presented with a tale of the heartiness, industriousness, and zealfulness of the Muslim soldier, and the favor that God provides. Khālid appears across authors and sources as the Muslim commander par excellence during the

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37) For more on this, see Nefeli Papoutsakis, *Desert Travel as a Form of Boasting: A Study of Dū‘r-Rumma’s Poetry* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 25.
38) Surrender agreements and commitments by the indigenous population to Muslim taxation are an important part of *futūḥ* material. When the conquest of cities and regions are discussed, these agreements are often enshrined following the reports of battle. Just as occurs with the discussion of battle plans and troop movements, however, the Muslim commander in the field is often depicted as communicating with the Caliph the terms of these agreements, thus lending the official “stamp of approval” for the use of this material in a legal form in subsequent generations.
conquest period. Accounts of his bravery and ferocity herald Muslim success from the moment he converts to Islam until his death. Most accounts suggest that his leadership was largely responsible for Muslim success over the Byzantines at the Battle of Yarmūk, and some reports even suggest that it was Muhammad himself who gave him the honorary title Sayf Allāh – the Sword of God – for his skill and service to Islam. As a figure with such strong, heroic undertones already tied to his memory, he would have been a fitting figure to have attached to the conquest of three of Dār al-Islām’s most important territories, which had held all of the seats of Caliphal power up to the lifetime of the authors. The account of the desert march fits well with his overarching depiction, the achievement of which only further enhanced his credentials as the ideal Muslim warrior.

Literary-critical exploration of Arabic historical material has done much over the last several decades to demonstrate the role of “authors as actors” in their texts. Critical analysis of the reports of Khālid’s moving between Iraq and Syria fits firmly within this role of authors as more than just wholesale transmitters of earlier material, but an active part of the manipulation – and construction – of the fabric of early Islamic history. Arabic historical writers like al-Ṭabarī would like us to believe that “it is not our [the author’s] fault that such information comes to [the author], but the fault of someone who transmitted it to us. We have merely reported it as it was reported to us,” but closer scrutiny of the material continues to suggest otherwise.

39) Ibn Sa’d, 120-121.
40) Here, I use Konrad Hirschler’s description of their role in this process. See Konrad Hirschler, Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors (London: Routledge, 2006).
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