

## The Most Important Historians

### [1. Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Muslim Bin ‘Ubaydallah Bin Shihāb al-Zuhri \(51–124 A.H.\)](#)

There is a difference of opinion about his date of birth and death. He was a learned scholar, a memorizer of the Qur’an<sup>1</sup> and an author who knew how to use the various expressions and idioms and he would use these in his works<sup>2</sup>. He was a poet<sup>3</sup> and a genealogist<sup>4</sup> who would look for the chains of narrators in the traditions<sup>5</sup>. He would strive in the quest for knowledge and would guard it. He kept aloof from the events and turmoil of his time<sup>6</sup>. He believed in the dissemination of knowledge among the people and used to say: ‘In the spread of knowledge there is the strengthening of religion and worldly life and in the path of knowledge all this comes together<sup>7</sup>.’

He studied about the seerah from Sa’eed bin al-Musayyab, ‘Urwa bin Zubayr and ‘Ubaydallah bin ‘Abdullah bin Utbah, and in his attitude towards his teachers, he displayed exemplary ethics and morals. He would accompany them, serve them and show the utmost reverence to them<sup>8</sup>. Zuhri made efforts to author some works. He would write down what he heard. When his works became known, people turned to him and benefitted greatly from his knowledge.

Zuhri started with Hadith, History and Expeditions. He wrote so much that his writings had to be carried on the backs of animals. When he died, he was in such a position that there was none more learned than him in history.<sup>9</sup> His knowledge was disseminated through his narrators. The most famous of them who lived in Haramayn and Hijāz included: ‘Umar bin Dinar, Yahya bin Sa’eed al-Anṣari, Musa bin ‘Uqba and others. From those who lived in Iraq, the most important ones included: ‘Abdullah bin ‘Umayr, Ism‘īl bin Abi Kh<sup>ḥ</sup>lid, ‘At<sup>ḥ</sup> ibn S<sup>ḥ</sup>‘ib; and from the other places like Syria and Egypt, there were Mansur bin S<sup>ḥ</sup>dh<sup>ḥ</sup>n, ‘Abd al-Karim Jazari, Thawr bin Yazid and others.<sup>10</sup>

The merits of Zuhri’s accounts of the expeditions over other works are as follows:

They were written with sincerity, honesty, clarity and eloquence. Zuhri had met some of the companions

who participated in battles with the Prophet (S) and he has narrated from them about the wars and the strategies of the Holy Prophet (S). The most important of them are: Abdullah bin ‘Umar, Anas bin M‘alik, Suhayl bin Sa’d and others<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, in *al-Musannaf* (vol. 5, the chapter on expeditions), we find numerous traditions that Zuhri has narrated from ‘Umar ibn R‘ashid. He too, was truthful in narration and reliable in transmission.

Many of the scholars<sup>12</sup> have praised and criticized the narrators of expedition accounts like Ibn Is’h‘aq and W‘aqidi, however Zuhri has been praised by all<sup>13</sup> and has been hailed as the most truthful and highly learned of his time. Therefore, we can rely upon what he has recorded or narrated about the battles of the Prophet (S).

Zuhri had a longstanding experience in recording expeditions<sup>14</sup>. He is the oldest writer to formulate a systematic and clear method in this field, therefore his recordings are well-grounded, clear and reliable and have been systematically categorized and are far off from the politics of authorship and other various discrepancies.

## **2. Abu ‘Abdillah Muhammad Ibn Is’h‘aq Bin Yas‘r al-Mutallabi (85–151 A.H.)**

Ibn Is’h‘aq was born in Madina and was buried in Baghdad after his demise. There is a difference of opinion regarding the date of his death<sup>15</sup>. His most important works include: *Kit‘ab al-Khulaf‘* and *al-Siyar wal-Magh‘azi wal-Mubtad‘*<sup>16</sup>. He was trustworthy and knowledgeable about expeditions and history and was also a memorizer of prophetic traditions<sup>17</sup>. Great scholars have narrated from him and Ibn Shih‘ab al-Zuhri, Ibn Hanbal and others have praised him<sup>18</sup>. M‘alik called him a Dajj‘<sup>19</sup> and accused him of following the Q‘adiriyya sect<sup>20</sup> and also deemed him to be one who narrates ah‘dith with improper and incomplete chains<sup>21</sup>.

The Seera of Ibn Is’h‘aq has only come down to us through the recorders of seera, the most important of whom were: Ibn Hish‘am, Tabari, Kal‘‘i, Ibn Sa’d and Ibn Atheer. All of these [people] have not presented the seera of Ibn Is’h‘aq in the same manner as the original, rather they have mentioned a summary of his statements and recordings. Ibn Hish‘am has himself acknowledged this in the introduction of his *al-Seera al-Nabawiyya*<sup>22</sup>, so it would be correct to say that this work is actually a summary and a selection of Ibn Is’h‘aq’s narrations.

He is one of the leaders of those who were involved in recording the seerah [of the Holy Prophet]<sup>23</sup> and is the first person to collect the accounts of the expeditions and record them<sup>24</sup>. His works are a source of reference for researchers today. The great recorders of expeditions like ‘A‘sim bin Umar Qat‘ada who wrote *al-Siyar wal-Magh‘azi* gave the following testimony about him: ‘The knowledge that Ibn Is’h‘aq placed at the disposal of the people through his narrations will never disappear<sup>25</sup>.’ When Zuhri was asked about Ibn Is’h‘aq’s accounts of expeditions, he said ‘he is the most learned of all people about the

expeditions<sup>26</sup>’.

Today, the narrations of Ibn Is’hāq that have been passed on by many reliable recorders of the seera like ‘Aṣim and Zuhri have reached us<sup>27</sup>. It can be said that Ibn Is’hāq is from those scholars who recorded the accounts of the expeditions based on old methods. One day this point was raised in front of him, he said: ‘I am only a safe keeper and recorder of the knowledge of expeditions<sup>28</sup>.’

The Merits of Ibn Is’hāq’s Seera:

He is the only person who has narrated the expeditions of the Holy Prophet (S) in its totality<sup>29</sup>, because the other Seera recorders have narrated the expeditions in an incomplete and disjointed fashion. Maybe their lifetimes were not enough for them to complete the work and their students did not expound on the details of their expedition accounts and sufficed with mentioning only a number of battles and wars.

The Seera of Ibn Is’hāq is detailed and contains numerous long narrations and includes mention of dates<sup>30</sup>. Shafi’i says: ‘Anyone who wishes to gain expertise about the expeditions needs (to study) Ibn Is’hāq<sup>31</sup>.’ Through lengthy odes, he has highlighted the narratives of what transpired on the battlefields<sup>32</sup>. All this points to the vastness of the Seera of Ibn Is’hāq. These odes have immortalized the victories and give important information about works, situations and personalities. Even though it is not possible to give exact details about what takes place on the battlefield, all the military strategies and skills employed, some of the particulars about the battles of the Prophet (S) have been directly reported.

### **3. Abu Abdillah Muhammad Ibn Umar al-Wāqidi (130–207 A.H.)**

Wāqidi was born in Madina and died in Baghdad<sup>33</sup>. He is buried in the Khayzarīn graveyard. He was an author and used to pay special attention in writing [about] the seerah and expeditions (of the Prophet (S)), to such an extent that he became one of the foremost authorities in this field. His most important works are: *al-Maghāzi al-Nabawiyya*, *Fath Afriqiyya*, *al-Radda*, *Fath al-‘Ajam*, *Fath Misr wa Iskandariyya*, *Akhabār Makkah*, *Tabaqāt*, *Futuh al-Iraq*, *Seerat Abi Bakr*, *The Battle between the Aus and Khazraj and others*<sup>34</sup>. The merits of Wāqidi’s works can be outlined as follows:

**Precise Information:** He has given detailed and precise information about those who participated in the battles, the route taken by the armies, the weapons and modes of transport used, provisions, descriptions of battlefields, the factors that helped in gaining victory or led to them facing difficulties in battle, the location of the martyrdom of soldiers, and anything related to warfare.

**Extensive Information:** He wrote and recorded everything that was related to the battles<sup>35</sup>, such that through his narrations, we learn many of the specifics regarding the military, because he has reported all the different aspects of issues pertaining to warfare and leadership. In this way, the information provided by Wāqidi in the areas of the circumstances of war, its location, the type of ground on which it was fought etc. is of great importance. If his writings about the battles were collected together, it would in

itself have been a source for the principles of war and battle at the time of the Prophet (S).

Recording of Exact Times<sup>36</sup>: In military management, for a commander, time and its determination is of the essence and can make all the difference in the result of the battle; whether it be victory or loss.

Recording of Exact Locations<sup>37</sup>: Wāqidi also recorded the exact locations of the battles and through this he gave value to the battlefields where the Prophet (S) fought. Many like Ibn Sa'd, Tabari and Ibn Katheer have narrated from Wāqidi about the birth and Prophethood of the Holy Prophet (S) and also his battles and conquests<sup>38</sup>.

Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat al-Kubr* stands out in its military reporting because it has been written according to Wāqidi's style, meaning he has similarly paid a great deal of attention to the recording of exact times and locations and sometimes describes the locations in which the battles took place and adds on to the narrations of Wāqidi and then, in another place, he discusses the principles of warfare<sup>39</sup>. From his writings it can be deduced that he is truthful and his narrations are authentic<sup>40</sup>. Many of the important aspects of Wāqidi's narrations and works were revealed and expounded by his student Ibn Sa'd.

## 4. Abu al-Rabi' Sulaymān Bin Musā Ibn Sālim al-Kalbi al-Himyari

Kalbi was born in Balans and grew up there and he died in enemy territory (in battle)<sup>41</sup>. He has narrated from Ibn Qasim Hubaysh, Ibn Zarqum, Ibn al-Waleed bin Abi al-Qasim and others<sup>42</sup>. He was famous for his eloquent oratory and writings<sup>43</sup> and gave great importance to recording and narrating ahadith. His most well known works are: *al-Iktifā bim Tadhammanhu 'an Maghzi al-Rasul (S)*, *Maghzi al-Khulaf* (4 volumes), *al-Musalsal 'an al-Ahadith* and *al-Athar wal-Isharat*.<sup>44</sup>

When his works were published and his message was spread, people came towards him and sought to benefit from him and many attended his teaching sessions. The most famous of these was Abdullah ibn al-Abirid who has eulogized him after his martyrdom<sup>45</sup>. With regards to the importance of his writing 'al-Iktifā' it must be said that its chain of transmission is strong and it describes the battles and their various aspects in detail, because Kalbi himself was a military person and had tasted the hardships of war. So if he has recorded something in the seera, he has done so truthfully and with total regard of his responsibility and questionability. Furthermore, in his books one senses an enlightening spirituality that none of the previous writers displayed.

Kalbi al-Balansi was a leader and a courageous commander who was steadfast in battle and in one of the battles he is said to have addressed one of the fleeing soldiers thus: 'Do you flee from Paradise?<sup>46</sup>' He was martyred while he still held the standard in his hand<sup>47</sup> and was encouraging and urging the soldiers to go forth against the enemy. Aside from this, Kalbi was a great poet who would compose epics and rouse the emotions of the people<sup>48</sup>.

## 5. Abu al-Fath Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdillah Ibn Sayyid al-Nās152

He was popularly known as Ibn Sayyid al-Nās. There is a difference of opinion regarding his date of birth and death. He died in Cairo. He studied under his father and a group of scholars, the most famous of whom was Ibn Daqiq al-‘Eid.<sup>49</sup> This scholar tutored him in religion, Arabic grammar and poetry<sup>50</sup>. He gained precedence over his contemporaries in the fields of Seera and history. His most important works include: *‘Uyun al-Athar fi Funun al-Maghāzi wa al-Shamā’il wa al-Siyar*, *Nur al-‘Uyun*, *Bushrā al-Labib fi Dhikr al-Habib* and *Tahsil al-Isāba fi Tafsil al-Sahāba*<sup>51</sup>.

Many scholars like Qādhī ‘Izz al-Deen Sharif, who has mentioned him in his *Wafayāt* and Ibn Katheer, Ibn Nāsir al-Deen, Suyuti and others have testified to his great knowledge<sup>52</sup>. He compiled the seera in two volumes by narrating what the recorders of the seera before him had written. That which makes his accounts of the expeditions stand out includes:

**Precision and Depth:** He would select authentic narrations and leave aside the weak ones. He would take this matter very seriously and would do it very well<sup>53</sup>. An example of this precision of his can be seen when he summarized his own book *‘Uyun al-Athar* and named it *Nur al-‘Uyun*. In this way it became easy for him to refer to previous works and to present his writings on the seera in a well-documented manner. One of the great scholars has said: “Ibn Sayyid wrote, compiled and corrected a lot in his beautiful handwriting and he created principles for this [also]<sup>54</sup>.”

Following the Method of Zuhri: Ibn Sayyid al-Nās in his book *al-Siyar wal-Tarikh*, has followed Zuhri’s method and has compiled all that which relates to the military. His *‘Uyun al-Athar* is an example of the *Maghāzi* of Ibn Is’hāq which has shadowed the *Seera* of Ibn Hishām and is formed of a selection from the *Maghāzi* of Wāqidī and a selection from scholars of history such as Tabari and Ibn Khayyāt. That which assisted him in this was his great knowledge of the sources of the seera. Ibn Sayyid al-Nās was also a specialist in jurisprudence and would benefit from the scholars of his time and gain knowledge from them. Ibn Zubayr says: “He gained the permission [to narrate traditions] from four-hundred scholars or more.”<sup>55</sup>

**Organization, Sequence and Reference:** Ibn Katheer has described him thus: “He occupied himself in the pursuit of knowledge and was better in this than everyone else. After he learnt the seera and history, he compiled them in two volumes... grand poetry, well written prose, complete eloquence and proper writing is what he had and he was attributed with kindness and good morals. He was loyal to the principles and practices of the previous scholars that relied on the traditions of the Holy Prophet (S).”

<sup>1</sup>. Dhahabi, *Tadhkirat al-Huffadh* 1: 108–113; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A’yān wa Anbā’ al-Abnā’iz* Zamān 4: 177–178; Ibn Hajar ‘Asqalāni, *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib* 9: 488, 450

<sup>2</sup>. Abu Na’im al-Isfahāni, *Hilyat al-Awliyā wa Tabaqāt al-Asfiyā* 3: 371

<sup>3</sup>. Marzbāni, *Mu’jam al-Shu’arā*: 345

4. Abu Na'im al-Isfahani 3:272
5. Ibid. 3:365
6. Ibn Khallikān 4:177; Abu Na'im al-Isfahani 3:364
7. Abu Na'im al-Isfahani 3:369
8. Ibid. 3:371
9. Ibid. 3:161. Unfortunately all his works and writings are non-extant. However, his narratives were used by later historians and thus can be found in these secondary sources. (Tr.)
10. Abu Na'im al-Isfahani 2:372–373
11. Khateeb Baghdadi, Tarikhu Baghdād 3:13–14; al-Dhahabi, Mizān al-I'tidāl fi Naqd al-Rijāl 3:470; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās 1:7
12. Abu Na'im al-Isfahani 3:361 onwards; Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri: 27
13. Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri: 30
14. Abu Na'im al-Isfahani 3:369 onwards
15. Khateeb Baghdadi 1:232; Ibn Khallikān 4:277; Yaqut Humayri, Mu'jam al-Udabā' 18:8
16. Ibid.
17. Khateeb Baghdadi 1:215, Ibn Hajar 'Asqalāni, Tahdhib al-Tahdhib 9:43 onwards
18. Al-Dhahabi 3:469
19. Khateeb Baghdadi 1:223
20. Khateeb Baghdadi 1:225; al-Dhahabi 30:470
21. Ibn Sayyid al-Nās 1:7
22. Ibn Hishām 1:7
23. Al-Dhahabi, Tadhkirat al-Huffadh 1:173
24. Yaqut Humayri, Mu'jam al-Buldān 5:18; Marghliyuth, Dirāsāt 'an al-Muwarrikheen al-'Arab: 998
25. Khateeb Baghdadi 1:220; Yaqut Himyari, Mu'jam al-Udabā' 6:18; Ibn Khallikān 4:276
26. Khateeb Baghdadi 1:219
27. Yaqut Himyari 6:18, Khateeb Baghdadi 1:225
28. Khateeb Baghdadi 1:223
29. Ibid. 1:214
30. Ibn Hajar 'Asqalāni 9:46
31. Al-Dhahabi, Mizān al-I'tidāl 3:472; Khateeb Baghdadi 1:219; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās 1:9
32. Al-Jumhi, Tabaqāt Fuhul al-Shu'arā' 1:8; Marghliyuth: 73
33. Ibn 'Asqir 15:395; al-Dhahabi, Tadhkirat al-Huffadh 1:348
34. Yaqut Himyari, Mu'jam al-Udabā' 8:281; Ibn Khallikān 4:348; Ibn al-Nadim, al-Firhist 1:144. Unfortunately most of Wāqidī's works are non-extant today. (Tr.)
35. Khateeb Baghdadi 3:6
36. Marghliyuth: 18
37. Ibn Sa'd 5:315
38. Tabari, Tārīkh al-Tabari 1:942,980
39. Ibn Sa'd 2:1–137
40. Khateeb Baghdadi 5:321, al-Dhahabi, Mizān al-I'tidāl 3:560. With regards to Ibn Sa'd's reliability, there is a difference of opinion among the various sects of Islām. (Tr.)
41. Ibn 'Imād Hanbali, Shadharāt al-Dhahab fi Akhbār man Dhahab 5:164; al-Katāni, al-Risāla al-Mustadhrafa: 198
42. Al-Nabāhi, Tārīkh Qudhāt Andalus: 119
43. Ibn 'Imād Hanbali, Ibid.
44. Al-Katāni, Ibid. He also wrote an important work called Futuh al-Radda (Tr.)
45. Al-Nabāhi: 120
46. Ibid. 119
47. Ibid. Ibn Shākir al-Katbi, Fawā'id al-Wafayāt 1:366

[48.](#) Kalā'ī was one of the great commanders in the war against the crusaders under Salāh al-Deen Ayyubi. (Tr.)

[49.](#) Al-Dhahabi, Tadhkirat al-Huffādh 4: 1481

[50.](#) Ibn 'Imād Hanbali 6: 108; Ibn Ilyās, Tārīkh Misr 1: 171

[51.](#) Al-Dhahabi 4: 1451

[52.](#) Ibid. Suyuti: 52

[53.](#) Suyuti: 520

[54.](#) Ibn 'Imād Hanbali 6: 108

[55.](#) Al-Dhahabi 5: 1451

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