

The Life and Scientific Activity of Ahmad Ibn Yahya al-Balazuri

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the life, teacher and scholarly activity of the 9th century historian and poet Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Balazuri on the basis of medieval sources.

Keywords: *history of early Islam, al-Balazuri, al-Mas'udi, conquest, Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Nadim, ibn Asakir, Yakut Hamawi, Semecarpus anacardium, caliph Mamun, science of hadith, Iraq, Damascus, caliph Mutawakkil, nadim, Futuh al-buldon, ansob al-ashraf.*

Introduction

In the eighth to ninth centuries, the science of history emerged in the Abbasid state along with the sciences of tafsir, kalam, hadith, and jurisprudence. Historians of this period mainly used the narrative method in the study of history. The events of the seventh century were told on the basis of oral accounts obtained from the narrators. These accounts were often overly subjective because they were written by clergymen and members of various religious groups. Therefore, when studying historical sources written in the eighth and ninth centuries, special attention should be paid to which religious groups and social classes the author belonged to because a comparative study of differences between sources written by authors belonging to the Murjah. The sources of the sources of the Amayyads, Shiites, Abbasids, foreigners and other military-religious groups are of great importance in reconstructing the real situation [1: 5].

Main part

Studying the history of early Islam, Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Madani (699–769), Abdulmalik ibn Hisham (d. 833), Muhammad ibn Umar al-Waqidi (747–823), Ali ibn Muhammad al-Madoini (752–843), Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Balazuri (d. 892), and the works of historians such as Sa'ad (784–845), Khalifa ibn Hayat (d. 854), and Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Balazuri (d. 892) can be listed.

Ahmad ibn Yahya ibn Jabir ibn Da'ud al-Katib al-Baghdadi al-Balazuri (d. 892) was one of the first to write a special historical work on the Arab wars of conquest. Balazuri's origins are believed to have been Persian. He was a poet and narrative historian and wrote many humorous poems. His grandfather, Jabir, spoke fluent Arabic and served as a secretary to the ruler of Egypt. Ahmad ibn Yahya was born and raised in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid state. His surname was Abul-Abbas, Abu Jafar, Abul Hasan or Abu Bakr [2: 164].

Medieval historians include al-Masudi (896–957), Muruj al-Zahab, [3:12], Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Nadim (d. 990), al-Fihrist, [2: 164] and Ali ibn Husayn ibn Asakir (1105–1176) History of Damascus [4:74], Yakut ibn Abdullah al-Hamawi (1178–1229) Mujam al-Udabo [5: 530], Kamaliddin Umar ibn Ahmad, known as Ibn al-Adim (1192–1262) "History of Bugyatut-talab fi Aleppo" [15: 1219], Shamsiddin Zahabi (1274–1348) "Siyar a'lam al-Nubala" [6: 309], Muhammad ibn Shakir al-Qutbi (1287–1363) "Fawat al-Wafiyat" [7: 155], Salahiddin al-Safdi

(1296-1363) "Kitab al-Wafiiyyat bil-Wafiiyyat" [8: 155], Ismail ibn Kathir al-Dimashki (1301–1372) "*al-Bidaya van-nihaya*" [9: 51]. Abu Ubaidullah Muhammad ibn Imran al-Marzbani (910–994), one of the first medieval historians, also mentioned al-Balazuri in his *Mujam ash-Shuaro*. However, parts of the work relating to the life of Ahmad ibn Yahya are not available in extant copies [10: 558].

The life of Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Balazuri is quoted in the works of several historians, and one can understand how reliable a historian he was. In the Middle Ages many works were written on historical themes. In later periods, however, the work and its author were ignored because their work reflected the interests of a particular group and community. Al-Balazuri's work did not serve the ideology of any group. Therefore historians have used his work in all periods, and the works of Tazkari contain information about the historian's life.

The correlation of al-Balazuri with Ahmad ibn Yahya, according to Ibn al-Nadim, was due to the illness he suffered during the last period of his life. According to him, Ahmad ate the seeds of balozur (bladur) and was seduced and depressed by its effects. That is why he is called al-Balozuri [2: 164]. Ibn Asakir, Ibn al-Adim and Ibn Qasir said that Ahmad Ibn Yahya was depressed at the end of his life. But he did not give information about the Balozur seed or the Balazuri ratio. According to Yakut Hamawi, the fruit of Balazur was eaten by Jabir ibn Daud, the grandfather of Ahmad ibn Yahya, and his name was Balozuri [5: 531]. On this basis we can say that the relation Baluzuri was inherited from Ahmad ibn Yahya from his ancestors. Muhammad ibn Shakir al-Qutbi and ibn Hajar al-Askalani ibn al-Nadim expressed the same opinion.

Today, the balozur tree is called *Semecarpus anacardium*. The tree grows naturally in the Himalayas and the hot regions of India. The fruit of the balozur tree is used in the preparation of laundry detergent. It was used as a chemical fertiliser in the 16th century. *Semecarpus anacardium* was called the 'marking nut' by Europeans. The ripe fruit is pleasant and sweet, but the black fruit is poisonous and can cause severe allergic reactions if consumed or if the resin comes into contact with the skin. It is used to treat diseases related to the digestive system and to balance phlegm. It also has the property of increasing mental and physical strength. The red-orange part is harvested and dried in the sun. It is consumed after it is half dried [11: 74–79].

There were other scholars in the Middle Ages who created with the Balazuri ratio. For example, Abu Muhammad Ahmad ibn Muhammad at-Tusi al-Balazuri (d. 950) created exactly this proportion. He was one of the outstanding scholars of his time in the field of hadith and preaching [12: 467], [6: 146]. However, the sources do not report why he took al-Balozuri's ratio. Shamsiddin al-Zahabi and Abu Sa'ad al-Samani (1113–1166) referred Ahmad ibn Yahya as "the great Balozuri" and Abu Muhammad Ahmad ibn Muhammad as "the little Balozuri". However, the sources do not mention any kinship or other connection between them.

To sum up, the ratio al-Balozuri comes from the name of the plant. Because almost all the written sources contain this information. However, they do not have a consensus on who used the plant. In addition, the description of the plant by experts in the field confirms that it has a negative effect on humans. However, its positive side is considered and used. Other scholars besides Ahmad ibn Yahya were also prominent in al-Balozuri's account.

The date of birth of Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Balazuri is not given in the sources. However, information provided by Ibn Asakir indicates that al-Balazuri was born in Baghdad in the late eighth or early ninth century. The historian Ibn Asakir states in his *History and Culture of Damascus* that Ahmad ibn Yahya wrote verses praising the caliph Mamun (813–833) [4:75]. Considering that one had to be at least 20 years old to reach the level of poetry in the palace of the

caliph at that time, we can say that al-Balazuri was born at the end of the eighth or beginning of the ninth century. Based on this, G. Goygov said that al-Balazuri was born around 810–812. [13: 3].

Ahmad ibn Yahya, like his father and grandfather, held a high position in the Abbasid palace in Baghdad. Its historians were Affan ibn Muslim (752–835), Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Daruki (784–860)¹, Muhammad ibn as-Sobba al-Dawlani (768–841), Ali ibn al-Madini (778–844.)), Abdullah ibn Salih al-Ajali (758–826), Abu 'Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam (774–838), Ali ibn Muhammad al-Madoini (752–843), Uthman ibn Abi Shaybah (d. 853)², Mus 'Ab al-Zubayri (773–851)³, Secretary al-Waqidi Muhammad ibn Sa'ad (784–845), Abdul-A'la ibn Hammad (d. 851)⁴, Muhammad ibn Hatam al-Samin (d. 849) , Abbas ibn Hisham al-Kalbi, Abbas ibn al-Walid al-Nursi (d. 852), Shayban ibn Farrukh (757–850), Abdul-Wahid ibn Ghiyas (d. 854), Amr ibn Maymun al-Naqid (d. 847), Ishaq ibn Isra'il (767–859), Abu Rabi al-Zahrani (d . 848), Khalaf al-Bazzar (767–844), Hawza ibn Khalifa (743–831) and other scholars [14 : 8]. He studied bibliography, poetry and genealogy from his teachers. Al-Balazuri wrote verses praising caliph al-Ma'mun (813–833) in his first verses.

Al-Balozuri also held a special place among the hadith experts in the science of hadith. Muhammad ibn Khalaf (d. 918), Ahmad ibn Ammar (d. 854), Yakub ibn Na'im, Yahya ibn al-Baryam, Abdullah ibn Abi Sa'ad, Yahya ibn al-Munjim [15: 1220] have told about it.

After gaining knowledge from prominent scholars of that time in Iraq, the scholar went to Damascus to deepen his knowledge. During this period, Damascus studied the science of biography and hadith from their followers, and there were teachers in these sciences who were known not only in the region where they lived, but also in the Islamic world. So, al-Balozuri went to Damascus to study. When the historian travelled is not mentioned in the sources. His academic career in Damascus took place between 833 and 847. It is known that Ahmad ibn Yahya was in Baghdad during the reign of Caliph Mamun, Caliph Mutawakkil (847–861) and later caliphs. However, his position during the reigns of Caliph Mutasim (833–842) and Caliph al-Wasik (842–847) is not mentioned. It can be concluded that al-Balozuri lived in Damascus during the time of these two caliphs. Ahmad ibn Yahya visited several cities of Damascus in search of knowledge. In particular, he studied in Damascus with Hisham ibn Ammar (d. 859), Umar ibn Said, in Homs with Muhammad ibn Musaffa al-Himsi (d. 860) and in Antioch with Muhammad ibn Abdurrahman (d. 857). [5: 530].

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The sources do not report when al-Balazuri returned from Damascus. However, based on the cities where the historian studied and the time of death of scholars in these cities, we can say that his journey lasted until 857 AD. Because in the order of the names of the places where Ahmad ibn Yahya studied, Antioch is mentioned last. Muhammad ibn Abdurrahman, who taught al-Balazuri in that city, died in 857 AD.

Muarritch returned from Samarra, the new capital of the Abbasid caliphate, rather than Baghdad, where he was born and raised in Damascus. When he returned he had a thorough

¹ Muhaddis. Imam Muslim, Imam Abu Dawud, Imam al-Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah narrated from him.

² A hadith scholar and commentator. It was narrated by Imam Bukhari, Imam Muslim, Imam Abu Dawud and Ibn Majah.

³ Muhaddith, historian and genealogist.

⁴ Hafiz and muhaddith. It was narrated by Imam Bukhari, Imam Muslim and Imam Abu Dawud.

knowledge of tafsir, hadith, genealogy, poetry, vocabulary and grammar. Al-Balozouri studied the above sciences for several years. He then rejoined the Caliph's scholarly community. He tried to show his talent during the reign of caliph Ma'mun. However, due to his youth and inexperience, he could not argue with the caliph's poets.

When the Caliphate passed to al-Mutawakkil, the removal of the Mu'tazilites from political positions and the restoration of the position of Ahl as-Sunnah scholars began. After that, Ahmad ibn Yahya also had the opportunity to join the Caliph's community of poets. Al-Balozuri's poems were aimed not only at praising officials but also at humorously reminding them of their duties. Therefore themes related to spiritual education can be found in his works [15: 1222]. The scholar was promoted to the rank of nadim⁵ of Caliph Mutawakkil [8: 155].

Ahmad al-Balazuri was associated with the caliphs Mutawakkil (847–861), Moustain (862–866), and Mutaz (866–869). There is no record of his association with the caliph Muntasir (861–862) in the sources. Probably because his period of caliphate was short and full of political disputes, he could not attend poetry meetings not only with al-Balozuri but also with other writers. But the caliph was one of the closest associates of Mustafa (862–866). The Caliph Mutaz (866–869) entrusted the education of one of his sons, Abdullah, to Ahmad ibn Yahya [14:12].

During the reigns of caliphs al-Mukhtadi (869–870) and al-Mutamid (870–892) it was in dire financial straits [5: 534]. Probably the reason why they have it so bad. Because during al-Mutamid even his friends turned away from him [14:14].

However, Ahmad ibn Yahya did not stop his scholarly activities. It was during this period (868–869) that al-Balozuri began writing his historical work *Futuh al-Buldon* (Conquest of Nations). The work is also called *Futuh al-buldon as-sagir*. However, Muhammad Shakir al-Qutbi, Yaqut al-Hamawi, Salahuddin al-Safdi and Ibn al-Nadim say that these are separate works, and that *Futuh al-Buldon* was called *Kitab al-Futuh* and *Futuh al-Buldon as-sagir*. His work is called *Kitab al-buldon as-Sagir*. The work was first published in Leiden in 1866 by the Dutch Orientalist Michael Jan de Guet (1836–1909).

Based on this publication, it was published in Cairo in 1901 and 1932. It was explored in the city in 1956 and 1958 by Salahuddin al-Munjid. The work was published in Beirut in 1957, 1978, 1983, 1987, 1991, 2000 and 2013. *Futuh al-Buldon* was translated into Latin in 1884. It was later translated into English by Philip Hury Hitti in 1916, into French by Clark Morgitten in 1924, into German by Oskar Rescher in 1917–1924, and into Persian in 1967. Some parts of the work have been translated into Russian by several Orientalists in different years. Particularly, parts of the history of Jordan and Palestine were published in 1897 by N.A.Mednikov [20], parts of the history of Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1927 by P.K.Juze [21], parts of the history of Khorasan in 1939 by S.Volin [22], Turkmenistan. And adjacent territories were translated in 1960 by L.E.Kubbel and V.V. Matveev [23] and L.I. Nadiradze [24] [13: 7].

According to the sources, al-Balozuri also wrote a book called "*Kitab al-buldon al-kabir*" (The Great Book of Countries), but it was not completed and has not reached us. In addition, al-Balozuri is the author of the book "*Kitab ansab al-ashraf*" ("The Book of Genealogy of Noble People") [7: 157]. Salahuddin al-Safdi called this work "*Jumalu nasab al-ashraf*" [8: 157].

Of them only "*Futuh al-Buldon*" and "*Kitab Ansab al-Ashraf*" survived and were published.

Ahmad al-Balozuri also worked as a translator and translated into Arabic a number of works written from Persian (Pahlavi). In particular, he poetically translated into Arabic the ancient epos "*Kitab ad Ardashir*" ("The Book of Ardashir's Reign") [2: 164].

⁵ Nadim is a public official in the position of minister or advisor today.

The exact time of Ahmad al-Balozuri's death is unknown. At the end of his life he was hospitalised in Al-Bimoristan (البيمارستان) where he died. Historians mention that his death occurred at the end of al-Mutamid caliphate (870–892) or at the beginning of al-Mutazid caliphate (892-902) [9:51]. Hence, his death is attributed to the year 891 or 892.

Conclusion

Al-Balozuri's *"Futuh al-Buldon"* (The Conquest of Nations) is the first specially written work to tell the story of the Arab wars of conquest. In the tenth century, the historian al-Masudi used this work extensively and praised it, saying, *"The book describes the lands of the east and the west, the north and the south. We do not know a better book than the conquest of nations"* [3:12]. This work is of particular importance to us because it reflects the military campaigns of the Arabs in different countries as well as the political and socio-economic history of the early period of the Arab Caliphate. This work is one of the most important sources for any scholar of early Islamic history such as *Tarikh ar-rusul wa-l-muluk* at-Tabari. The work also provides information about the names of places that existed in history but have disappeared or changed their name today. At the same time, the author was influenced by the legal norms of his time, i.e. the late ninth century, when he spoke about some problems related to the first period of the Arab Caliphate.

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