

BLOOD FEUD AND POWER IN EARLY ʿABBĀSID TIMES*

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Tribal conflicts in early Muslim history are almost exclusively perceived within the context of the well-known antagonism between Qays and Yaman, the so-called Northern and Southern tribal confederations. We find this approach in our sources and followed more or less critically by most scholars. We thus observe a general tendency to interpret the ongoing conflicts according to this pattern, and to neglect more complex issues of tribal conditions¹. However, as a thorough investigation of the source material reveals, many more details on tribal conflicts may be extracted. Valuable information can be gained from local historical records such as the *Tārīḥ al-Mawṣil* and *Tārīḥ Madīnat Dimašq*. They not only transmit the names and *ansāb* of the persons involved, but give us at times some valuable insight into the underlying motives of their behaviour. Thereby, they help us to understand the workings of tribal antagonism in considerable detail, and permit us to reconsider the validity of the Qays and Yaman pattern.

One of the most striking features which come to light through the analysis of such information is the prominent role attributed to blood feud. For this reason, it seems appropriate to investigate this phenomenon further. As many of the mechanisms and causes of blood feud have been analysed by anthropologists, my data will be considered in the light of these modern theories on this subject. We are well aware of the problems resulting from a projection of contemporary phenomena one thousand years back in time and of the need to proceed carefully. In the case of blood feud, however, we believe that the relying on anthropological theories helps to understand the ongoing conflicts, and offers a convincing interpretation of the events.

A quite detailed tradition on blood feud is transmitted in the history of Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīḥ Madīnat Dimašq*, an important source for tribal history. It is included in the biography of Maʿyūf b. Yaḥyā, and goes back to Abū l-Ḥusayn ar-Rāzī, a well-known Damascene historiographer of the 4th century². The special value of this text consists in its apparently “pure” character, because it seems to be unaffected by

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¹ This is especially true for the Umayyad period. Cf. Dozy 1932:70 ff.; Wellhausen 1902 passim; Kennedy 1986:99-116; Lapidus 1988:63-67; Hawting 1986:73-76, 82-83, 93 ff., Dixon, 1971:83 ff.

² For Abū l-Ḥusayn ar-Rāzī cf. Conrad 1991.

tendentious alterations and lacks the usual schematic pattern³ found in other sources. The relevant information on blood feud are rendered in its second part:

*Ḥumayd b. Ma'yūf succeeded to his father Ma'yūf. Then, Aḥmad b. al-Ḥakam died. His son Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥakam with the kunya Abū Šabīb had a number of mawālī. At the place he was living at, there was a Christian named Salmūn. One of his mawālī returned home in the evening and discovered in his house Salmūn an-Naṣrānī together with his wife. Therefore, he complained about him to his mawlā Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥakam. The Christian went away in fear and became a Muslim at the hand of Ḥumayd b. Ma'yūf. But the mawlā watched Salmūn until he killed him. As a result, Ḥumayd b. Ma'yūf flew into a rage and said: "Verily, by this murder, he has killed nobody but his mawlā Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥakam!"⁴ Then he kept his eye on him until Yaḥyā proceeded to a plantation he possessed named Mayṭūr. Ḥumayd b. Ma'yūf laid down in ambush together with a group of his ḡilmān until Yaḥyā came back from his plantation. Then Ḥumayd came out from his ambush, and they fought against each other violently. One of [Yaḥyā's] ḡilmān, a black one named Šandal, was killed. Thereupon, Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥakam rode straight away to the Iraq (Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīḥ* 17, 55).*

To analyse this conflict, it seems best to investigate at first the reasons for homicide. Let us begin with the second case. There, homicide is inspired by a precedent murder. A *ḡulam* of Yaḥyā is killed in revenge for a dead *mawlā* of Ḥumayd. Bloodshed has thus provoked further bloodshed, and we have a case of a classical form of blood feud.

The first killing however seems to have little to do with blood feud. A husband discovers an illicit liaison between his wife and another male person and puts his rival to death. Similar reactions occur all over the world and are not specific to tribal people. Anyhow, the tribal concept of honour and shame is closely connected with the chastity of women. Any infringement on female chastity is thus conceptualized as a loss of honour (Meeker 1976:387-394; Black-Michaud 1975:227-228; Caton 1987: 91). As anthropological research has shown, the shedding of blood is connected with similar ideas. As long as revenge has not been taken, the victim's clan suffers a loss of honour⁵. For this reason, the reaction of the deceived husband resembles the revenge in a blood feud, and may be related to the same concept.

The analogy between the two cases becomes even more apparent if we look at the persons involved and their respective dependence on tribal leaders. According to contemporary research, the responsibility for blood feud is shared by a genealogically

³ For such schematic patterns, cf. Orthmann 2000:28-72.

⁴ The translation of this sentence is problematic, because it is defective in Arabic.

⁵ Kressel 1996:98, 103, 122, 126; Antoun 1968:680; Black-Michaud (1975:80-85, 184 ff) refers in this connection to the conception of debt.

related group of tribal people down to the fifth generation (Black-Michaud 1975:39-46; Bräunlich 1934:80-81; Ginat 1987:16-18; Chelhod 1968:46-48; Lindholm 1986:347; Lindholm 1996:61; Khazanov 1984:135). But in practice, it is mainly the closest relatives of the victim who take revenge (Black-Michaud 1975:50; Chelhod 1968:45). This observation is true for ʿAbbāsīd times, too. Usually it is the son or the brother of the victim who takes up arms, and revenge is regarded as his duty (al-Azdī, *Tārīḥ* 313-314; at-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḥ* II 1851, 1904, 1965-66, 1984-85; Orthmann 2000:360-362).

In the above example however, we are dealing with a specific group of people, the *mawālī*. Instead of being full members of their tribe, the *mawālī* were granted only restricted rights (*EP* VI, 875-876, art. "Mawla"). This state of affairs is clearly visible in the conduct of both the deceived husband and his rival and later victim. The deceived husband was a *mawla* of Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥakam. When he learned about his wife's affair, he did at first not attempt to kill his rival himself, but turned to his patron. Obviously, the responsibility for revenge rested with Yaḥyā, and not with him. Therefore, we may deduce that this affair was not regarded as a personal matter, but as a collective offense of the tribal group as a whole. A similar transfer of responsibility may be detected when the *mawla* killed his rival after all: it was his patron who was blamed for this act, and another member of his group who fell victim to the ensuing revenge.

The case of the caught lover is even more interesting in this respect, and gives further evidence for the transfer of responsibility by a *walā*'-alliance. Having been a Christian before, this man converted to Islam after his encounter with the deceived husband. This step is not to be regarded as a sudden remembering of religious concepts in the presence of mortal danger, but as an attempt to attain the protection of Ḥumayd b. Maʿyūf and his tribe. The effectiveness of such an alliance becomes apparent after the convert's violent death. This deed was regarded as a clear-cut provocation of Ḥumayd and his tribal group, and avenged as soon as possible.

In the case of the ensuing homicide, aggression was not directed against the actual killer, but against his patron: he was attacked and lost a member of his entourage during the fight. As anthropological research has shown, such a deviation from direct revenge fits into the principles of blood feud. Revenge does not have to be directed against the murderer himself: it could be another member of the same solidarity group (Gellner 1990:109; Gellner 1992:91; Salzman 1987:2; Ginat 1987:16; Peters 1990:61). The principle of equivalency has to be maintained though. The same seems to have been true in early ʿAbbāsīd times.

Some scholars stress however that usually, a revenger targets the murderer himself or one of his closest relatives (Ginat 1987:41). The fact that in our example, another person was killed may have been a mere accident. Nevertheless, it seems more likely that the victim was chosen with care. Especially the circumstance that Yaḥyā was observed for a while and then ambushed supports this presumption. But why should Ḥumayd have killed intentionally one of Yaḥyā's *gilmān* instead of the murderer?

To answer to this question, we have to take in consideration some anthropological theories on the mechanisms of blood feud.

One of the most convincing studies on blood feud and its underlying motives was written by Black-Michaud some twenty years ago. Black-Michaud describes blood feud as a device for political differentiation in a society characterized by total scarcity. As in such a society, it is impossible to accumulate provisions, people cannot be differentiated according to economic conditions. For this reason, the concept of honour takes over the function of social stratification. Every loss of honour results in a loss of power, and has to be settled as soon as possible. As any physical injury is conceptualized as a loss of honour, any attack against a member of a tribal group is regarded as an attack against its power and prestige. The lost prestige can only be regained by revenge, but not by the acceptance of bloodmoney. Consequently, a tribal group will accept bloodmoney only when revenge is impossible. The reaction of the victim's clan therefore indicates its position *vis-à-vis* the other group. As long as revenge has not been taken, they are regarded as inferior, while the other side automatically gains in prestige. For this reason, the victim's group will attack sooner or later, and blood feud does never end (Black-Michaud 1975:25-27, 80-85, 121-122, 160-168, 172-178).

Black-Michaud's theory has been supported by field data collected by Gideon Kressel who has analysed the relationship between power and blood feud in a small Palestinian town. He found that the working of blood feud is indeed directly linked to power relationships. It not only indicates the social status of tribal groups, but also serves as a means to change it. Newly attained strength can best be demonstrated by aggression (Kressel 1996:*passim*).

The value of these theories for the analysis of the conflict between the Banū Ma'yūf and the Banū l-Ḥakam becomes evident if we look at the beginning of Ma'yūf b. Yaḥyā's biography:

Aḥmad b. Yazīd b. al-Ḥakam was a brave and courageous man. He was living in a village of the Gūṭa named al-Arzūna⁶. The Yaman in the other villages gathered around him and made him their leader. There are many accounts about him. According to one of them, the Amīr who came to Damascus (...) ⁷ asked for [Aḥmad b. Yazīd b. al-Ḥakam], and sent for him to the village of Arzūna. He came to him, and he respected him, and then he offered to make him his deputy in Damascus. But he refused and said: "I am already an old man, and I have no need for something like

⁶ For Arzūna, cf. Yāqūt, *Muḡam* s.v.

⁷ This passage is difficult to read. Unfortunately, it contains an important reference to the dating of the conflict by mentioning a certain Ibn Bayhas. The best known person of this name is Ibn Bayhas al-Kilābī who ruled in Damascus during the crises which occurred after the death of Hārūn ar-Rašīd. However, the names of other persons mentioned refer to the era of al-Manšūr. Cf. Orthmann 2000:459, also rem. 391.

that." He asked: "Is there any Yamānī with many adherents, and who is suitable for the position we offered to you?" He answered: "Yes, Maʿyūf b. Yaḥyā!" He sent for him and made him come, and then he appointed him as his deputy. But his days were days of harm and drought and high prices (Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīḥ* 17, 54).

Leaving aside the legendary and incredible account of Aḥmad b. al-Ḥakam's voluntary renunciation of the office of governor, we may deduce from this tradition that there existed in the Ġūṭa of Damascus at least two influential Yamanite clans. One of them was given the governorship of Damascus. The bestowing of such an official position normally strengthens the power of its receiver (Khazanov 1984:216-217, Marx 1978:58; Brooks 1983:339; Gellner 1990:439; Lapidus 1990:42-43).

For this reason, it seems quite justified to assume that the Banū Maʿyūf were in a superior position *vis à vis* the Banū l-Ḥakam. Probably, the Banū l-Ḥakam were not content with their inferior status. The conflict which occurred after the death of Maʿyūf b. Yaḥyā may thus be interpreted as a manifestation of latent rivalry between the groups. By giving shelter to the Christian and by accepting him as his *marwā*, Ḥumayd b. Maʿyūf indirectly challenged the power of Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥakam who wanted to punish this person, and who was prevented from doing so by this protection. The later killing of the converted Christian by Yaḥyā's *marwā* in its turn challenged the power of Ḥumayd b. Maʿyūf, because a member of his tribal group was attacked. Maybe, this act was secretly ordered by Yaḥyā who wanted to provoke his rival.

In the light of these considerations, the fact that Ḥumayd did not kill the murderer, but ambushed Yaḥyā himself and slew one of his *gilmān* may be interpreted as an act of willful and direct aggression against his rival. He exploited the situation to demonstrate his own courage and superiority. As the end of the biography shows, this demonstration was quite effective. His rival did not try to attack him again, but had recourse to an outside power:

Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥakam rode straight away to the Irak, went to ʿĪsā b. Mūsā al-Hāšimī and complained about the Banū Maʿyūf. He said that the black gūlām who had been killed had not been his gūlām, but his brother.

*He said: Thereupon, a group of the Banū Maʿyūf was taken to the Irak, and their affairs got out of hand. They possessed an estate in the region of Arzūna, so [Yaḥyā] requested it from the caliph, and he gave it to him. He turned it into a graveyard, and the region is known today by the name of aṣ-Ṣawāfī (Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīḥ* 17, 55).*

As becomes evident by the analysis of other examples of blood feud, only weak and inferior tribes call on the government for help and intervention (Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīḥ* (ed.) 18.1.411; al-Balādurī, *Ansāb* 178a-b; al-Azdī, *Tārīḥ* 354. Orthmann 2000: 397-402). For this reason the end of this conflict clearly shows that the Banū l-Ḥakam were still in an inferior position. When the Banū Maʿyūf were sent to exile, Yaḥyā tried to change the balance of power to his favour. By requesting an estate from their possession, he strengthened his own economic conditions and weakened his rivals

at the same time. But his success lasted for a short time only⁸. Later on, at the time of Hārūn ar-Rašīd, we read a lot about the Banū Maʿyūf who played an important part in the tribal conflicts of the Ġūṭa, but nothing is said about the Banū l-Ḥakam at that time.

The interpretation of this blood feud in terms of a power struggle and competition for influence in the Ġūṭa of Damascus finally induces us to consider the genealogical relationship between the tribes concerned. Ḥumayd b. Maʿyūf and Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥakam both belonged to the Yamanite tribal confederation. If we retrace their respective *ansāb*, we see that both were members of the same subtribe of Hamdān, the Haḡūr. Their family tree was split only some generations before (Caskel 1966: I, plate 227). The conflict between these groups was hence a conflict between relatively closely related clans who even lived in the same villages of the Ġūṭa.

This observation takes us back to our critique of the view which explains almost every tribal conflict by a single antagonism between Qays and Yaman. In our example, the parties involved shared common descent and territory, but their genealogical closeness did not prevent them from mutual aggression. Their hostility resulted from local competition for power and influence and had nothing to do with wider concerns. If we examine similar conflicts, we notice that the same motifs can be detected again and again. Competition and strife occurred quite frequently between related tribes living in the same region. Very often, the government played the members of a same tribe off against each other. The mere fact that this method was successful clearly indicates the precariousness of tribal solidarity even at a level of close genealogical bonds. Therefore, the factual importance of a common belonging to either of the two confederations, Qays or Yaman, seems even more doubtful. But if we accept this, we have to reconsider prevailing theories on tribal conflicts in early Muslim history.

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⁸ It has to be admitted that this view presupposes that my dating of the events to the epoch of al-Manṣūr is correct: Orthmann 2000:458-459.

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