

Origins of the Islamic State

In his work Origins of the Islamic State, Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri gives an account of several early Islamic conquests in the mid seventh century, during the Rashidun Caliphate. He outlines the strategic capture of several cities, including the major Byzantine city of Damascus, and explains in detail how the Muslims treated conquered peoples after (successful) conquests. Al-Baladhuri's detailed account informs us that the early Islamic conquests were astoundingly swift and successful; according to al-Baladhuri, this can be attributed to seamless military and religious leadership, sound tactical strategy, and the strategic stationing of Muslim garrisons in conquered cities.

Leadership was no doubt part of the Islamic success. Al-Baladhuri mentions many times how leadership was centralized, and we get the impression that knowing who was to lead was as important as the quality of that leadership itself. For example, abu-Bakr clearly informs the commanders that “when ye all fight together, your commander is the one in whose province ye are fighting” (al-Baladhuri 167), his three commanders being tasked with capturing Palestine, Jordan, and Damascus. Abu-Bakr was also clear with who was the religious leader, opting for Amr to lead the prayer ‘in case all the armies were united’ (al-Baladhuri 167). From this example we see the importance of not just military, but also religious leadership a commander had to provide, and how important it was for the leadership to be internally organized with specific measures to prevent conflict between commanders in case they fought together. Religious leadership no doubt elevated morale, perhaps another factor of Muslim success. This is not just the work of abu-Bakr either – whenever there was a cooperative battle, “the commanders would choose [Khalid] as their chief” (al-Baladhuri 167) demonstrating a sense of internal cooperation even without explicit orders from the caliph. Later, during the capture of Damascus, Khalid had

made a signed pact with the pope, but later this pact was called into question as for this conquest Khalid was not the rightful commander (al-Baladhuri 188). Remarkably, abu-Ubaidah defends Khalid's agreement, saying "even the lowest of the Muslims can make binding terms on [our] behalf" (al-Baladhuri 188), showing an astounding degree of internal consistency in the Muslim leadership. Compared to the unstable internal policies and internal conflict of the Byzantine Empire, for example, it is clear to see why the Muslims were victorious, even if smaller in number.

Tactical shrewdness was also a factor in Muslim success. This is most apparent during the conquest of Damascus, where during the night, and when the inhabitants were busy with a feast, Khalid's forces used ladders to gain access to inside the gate, and then "cooperated and opened the door" (al-Baladhuri 187), permitting the city to be breached and quickly captured. Tactics like using ladders to open the gate, as opposed to simply laying siege and trying to break in directly using raw military strength, or more conventional siege engines, are much more efficient; additionally, considering the moderate size of the Muslim forces, using an approach like ladders would save a considerable amount of manpower and casualties, something that must have been an important consideration.

Finally, the way the Muslims governed captured cities enabled them to hold onto their conquests and to easily expand their empire. After cities came under Muslim rule and conquest, and particularly if the city was in a strategic position "overlooking a wide territory or the coast" (al-Baladhuri 196), there would be "stationed in it whatever number of Muslims was necessary" (al-Baladhuri 196). This Machiavellian way of governance, via military presence, enabled the Muslims to easily hold onto their cities and "flock to [them] for reinforcement" should the "enemy start a revolt" (al-Baladhuri 196). With the overtly military way that the Muslims held

cities after they fell, they can not only tightly hold onto their conquests and quell rebellions, but this also ensured that subject populations were behaving in line and paying their taxes; tax revenue is important for any empire, and the Caliphate later demonstrated this with the Mawali system. As the caliphate becomes more imperial with each new conquest, an official military presence in cities is reminiscent of a large, sprawling empire, something that the Caliphate was quickly turning into.

Al-Baladhuri's account of the early Muslim conquests paved the way for understanding how they were able to grow astoundingly quickly from a small state to a sprawling empire; the work is well-balanced and often introduces multiple points of view as historical uncertainty for the reader to discern. It is a valuable historical source that has helped us identify the reasons for Muslim success.

References

- [1] Yahya, Al-Baladhuri Ahmad ibn. The Origins of the Islamic State. Translated by Hitti Philip Khûri, Columbia University, 1916.