

## Scholars, Figures, and Groups in al-Azdi's *Futūḥ al-Shām*

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The book titled *Futūḥ al-Shām (The conquests of Syria)* and compiled by Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Azdi (died between 160/776 and 215/830)<sup>1</sup> is the oldest fully preserved historical work we have at hand. Being a typical work of *akḥbār* historiography (with all implications for historical teaching as found in other sources of this type), it represents an impressive and detailed narrative about the early Muslim expansion into Greater Syria (henceforth: Syria). The narrative begins with Abū Bakr assembling troops in Medina and then dispatching them to various parts of Syria and southern Iraq. Following this, the book turns to the fights, diplomatic missions, and other challenges (e.g., theological disputes) that these troops faced when confronted by their opponents. Throughout this text, the reader encounters small skirmishes and much more substantial military clashes between local garrisons and fighters emerging from the Arabian Peninsula. Numerous confrontations occur, leading to the surrender of cities after the conclusion of a treaty. In the course of this narrative, many groups and more than 200 persons feature prominently. On the one hand, among the recurring groups are "the Muslims,"<sup>2</sup> who had been dispatched by Abū Bakr, and their opponents and "defenders of Syria," "the Byzantines." On the other hand, the narrative often focuses on individuals, particularly the military commanders, such as Abū 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrāh, Khālid b. al-Walīd, and Yazīd b. Abī Sufyān, or the Byzantine emperor Heraclius. Prominent references are also made to the scholars listed in the work's *isnāds*, or chains of transmitters. Therefore, in this study I differentiate between (individual) scholars who taught and transmitted the work or the traditions therein, and actors who are mentioned in the course of the narratives and who can be divided into two categories: figures (i.e., individual actors) and groups (i.e., collective

- 1 For an outline and discussion of the wide range of conclusions reached by researchers about al-Azdi's death date, see Scheiner, *Past*, ch. 2.
- 2 Quotation marks are used to highlight that particular groups are literary constructions used in the *Futūḥ al-Shām*. The same, of course, applies to some persons. However, in these cases quotation marks are left out for the sake of readability.

actors).<sup>3</sup> While scholars are a priori assumed to have been active as educators during their respective lifetimes,<sup>4</sup> figures and groups are regarded as characters of a narrative—in other words, as conceptualizations of the compiler-author and/or the individual scholars. In other words, for the present study I do not assume that figures and groups were "historic persons" (a claim, however, that in most cases can be realistically made). Instead, I take them as literary characterizations within the narrative.

### 1 Methodology

Hence, the complete set of scholars, figures, and groups mentioned in the *Futūḥ al-Shām* will be studied in what Sebastian Günther once coined as an "immanence-based" approach (that is taking the text as an object of analysis, while disregarding its context).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this set is so comprehensive that it has to be analyzed through the mechanism of a quantitative methodology.<sup>6</sup> Such a holistic approach, however, can neither engage deeply with the narratological representation of *all* figures or groups, nor provide a detailed analysis of all *isnāds* in the work. However, it is possible to use quantitative data on scholars, figures, and groups to arrive at general statements about the composition and the relation of each of these categories to one another. In addition, the data assembled for this task allows for conclusions to be drawn about the cohesion of the narrative and, hence, about the underlying question of authorship.<sup>7</sup> Despite there being a consensus in contemporary scholarship that Abū

- 3 I did not come upon collective transmitters, i.e., groups that are said to have transmitted traditions. They can be found, however, in other historical works when *akḥbār* are introduced by the verb *qālū* (they said).
- 4 Of course, some transmitters of *akḥbār* may be fictitious. However, this has to be proven on an individual basis.
- 5 See Günther, Introduction xvii, where the "immanence-based" or "immanence-oriented" approach is distinguished from the "socio-historical."
- 6 I was inspired to take up this approach by the various publications of John Nawas and Monique Bernards, who regularly used quantitative analytical approaches to deepen our understanding of Islamic civilization. However, they typically draw on multiple biographies derived from a number of Arabic sources, rather than analyzing the dramatis personae of only one work. For Nawas's and Bernards's research, in particular their Ulama Project, see for example Bernards and Nawas, *Distribution*; and, Nawas, *Contribution*. For another biographical study about the Companions in which the author, Fuad Jabali, also employed a quantitative approach, see Jabali, *Companions*. I thank Adam Walker for pointing this out to me.
- 7 For a similar approach using geographical data found in the *Futūḥ al-Shām*, see Scheiner, *Terminology*.