

Khan had been a blacksmith, for example, must have been fully aware of the meaning of these traditions, which they transmitted to us *nolens volens* for what they were not: a detailed description of the facts as they had taken place, that is history. Being foreign to their context of enunciation, these authors could not grasp the full meaning of these narratives, which researchers were soon to qualify as apocrypha, to think of them as the result of popular etymologies and games of assonance, confusions and successive distortions. In other words, to consider them either false or unfounded. In fact, beyond the necessary contingencies of oral transmission, the statements reported by our various sources were accurate; it is their context that we lack to give them a sense.

We can try, and this is what I have sought to do here, to reconstruct this context by cross-checking the bits of information we have at our disposal: this context is that of the *longue durée* that links the entire Eurasian steppe from the Türks, at least, to the Mongols. It is made up of a “savoir partagé”,¹⁴¹ composed of myths whose filiation with each other is obvious, a sacred repertoire, traditions and rituals common to periods and socio-political groups, allowing the expression of an alternative narrative to the historical one, which operates by allusions and understatements well understood by its recipients but unintelligible for an outsider.¹⁴²

This narrative has a political purpose and an immediate efficacy, which makes me think that it is not a popular tradition, but rather a construction coming from the high spheres of the Mongol Empire. It aims to give an understandable meaning to the Mongol conquest initiated by Chinggis Khan not only to the Mongols themselves, but also to all the nomadic subjects of the empire, and thus, by drawing on a common repertoire, to unify them within a pan-nomadic empire, in an effort parallel to that developed by traditional historiography to bring the Turks and the Mongols back to a common root.¹⁴³ Hence the coexistence of such a narrative of the symbolic origins of the Mongol Empire alongside an official history – since, from the *Secret History* to the *Yuan-shi*, via the Persian historiography (with the notable exception of Jūzjānī, who wrote from his refuge in India), the vast majority of the sources on which we rely to reconstruct the birth of the Mongol Empire are to varying degrees the work of court historians. The latter was for an elite, or even only for the imperial clan. The former was addressed to all the nomads of the empire in the colourful language of their beliefs, of their mental universe, which they had shared for centuries.

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

01 Temmuz 2021

SIMON BERGER
EHESS, Paris.

<simon.berger@ehess.fr>

¹⁴¹F. Hartog, *Le Miroir d'Hérodote : essai sur la représentation de l'autre* (Paris, 1991), p. 27.

¹⁴²See A. Bensa, *La fin de l'exotisme. Essais d'anthropologie critique* (Toulouse, 2006), p. 35.

¹⁴³Dobrovits, “The Turco-Mongolian Tradition”.

Ka'b b. Eshraf (11008)

The Murder of the Jewish Chieftain Ka'b b. al-Ashraf:

A Re-examination*



EHSAN ROOHI

Abstract

*The murder of the Prophet's chief Jewish opponent, Ka'b b. al-Ashraf, led to grave consequences for the tribe of Banū al-Naḍīr and for the Jews as a whole. The incident ushered in a series of hostile Muslim-Jewish encounters that reached its climax in the battle of Khaybar. Despite the constructive study undertaken by previous scholars, there still seem to be some contradictory elements and vague accounts that have been either utterly ignored or for which a satisfactory explanation is lacking. In the light of certain striking pieces of evidence, scattered in unlikely places in the *sīra* and *tafsīr* compendia, the present study sets out to examine critically the extent to which the accounts of Ka'b's murder can be trusted. It will be argued that what we are faced with is seriously distorted material with logical absurdities and discrepancies that cannot easily be reconciled. Apart from the historical reconstruction, special attention will be devoted to a momentous historiographical point—that our reports have been doctored for political reasons. This helps us adopt a more realistic view of the individuals whose names occurred in the accounts of the event in question.*

Keywords: Ka'b b. al-Ashraf; battle of Khaybar; the Banū al-Naḍīr's expulsion; *sīra* and *tafsīr* compendia; early Muslim-Jewish hostile encounters; Islamic origins

Introduction

As the son of a gentile father and a Jewish mother, Ka'b b. al-Ashraf was considered to be a member of the Jewish faith in which matriarchy dominates.¹ He attained such a high position among his maternal relatives that his murder marked, as the Islamic sources assert, not only the end of an age—that of Banū al-Naḍīr's political prominence in the oasis of Yathrib/Medina—but it also inaugurated the outbreak of a new wave of hostile Muslim-

*I am grateful to Hadi Taghavi, Hadi Sabouhi and Muhammad Ghandehari for their valuable suggestions. Thanks are also due to the anonymous referees for their constructive comments.

¹W. M. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, 1956), p. 210; R. B. Serjeant, “The *Sunnah Jāmi'ah*, Pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the *Tahrim* of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-called “Constitution of Medina””, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 41 (1978), p. 32; H. Mazuz, *The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews of Medina* (Leiden, 2014), p. 45.