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# THE QURRĀ' IN EARLY ISLAMIC HISTORY

BY

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(The Hague)

In two fairly recent publications I came across two contradictory interpretations of the term *qurrā'* as it occurs in early Muslim historical texts. Until recently this term was generally taken to mean 'Qur'ān reciters'. The two studies referred to are M. A. Shaban's *Islamic history A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132), a new interpretation*<sup>1)</sup> and G. Martin Hinds' *Kūfan political alignments and their background in the mid-seventh century A.D.*<sup>2)</sup>. Shaban considers the term *qurrā'* as a derivation *not* of the root *Qāf-Rā'-Hamza* but of the root *Qāf-Rā'-Yā'*, and interprets it accordingly as 'villagers', synonymous with *abl al-qurā'*. The evidence Shaban adduces is impressive<sup>3)</sup>, but, in my eyes, much more can be said about this issue. Hinds, on the other hand, adheres to the more conservative view and reads the term as standing for 'Qur'ān reciters'. However, he places them in a new light<sup>4)</sup>.

Nobody will contest the assumption that in early Islamic history there must have been 'villagers' as well as 'Qur'ān reciters'. It is the purpose of this paper to sort out the interpretations of the term *qurrā'* in various contexts. Also a reappraisal of the interpretation offered by Shaban will be ventured.

An appropriate historical episode to start the discussion with concerns the so-called *musayyarūn*. These were people who, at one time, were expelled from Kūfa by the then governor Sa'īd b. al-Āṣ in the year 33/653. There are many versions of this story two of which are recorded in Ṭabarī on the authority of Sayf b. 'Umar and Wāqidī respectively, and one in Balādhurī on the authority of Abū Mikhnaf<sup>5)</sup>.

1) Cambridge 1971.

2) In: IJMES, II, 1971, p. 346-367.

3) Cf. p. 23 and 51, especially note 1.

4) Cf. p. 358 f.

5) Cf. Ṭabarī, *Annales*, ed. cum aliis M. J. de Goeje, Leiden 1879-1901, I, p. 2907-2921, and Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-asbrāf*, V, ed. S.D.F. Goitein, Jerusalem 1936, p. 39-47.

These three versions more or less correspond in that Sa‘id expelled a small group of people from Kūfa because they had quarreled with him in a disagreeable manner over the distribution of the wealth of the conquered lands<sup>1</sup>). Sa‘id wrote to ‘Uthmān asking his permission to banish them, and here I quote Abū Mikhnaf: “I cannot hold Kūfa in hand with Mālik al-Ashtar and his companions present. They are called the *qurrā* and they are a little stupid”. Sayf’s version also has the term *qurrā* indicating these people and Wāqidī’s text seems corrupt in this passage.

‘Uthmān advised Sa‘id to send them away to Syria to Mu‘āwiya. Then ‘Uthmān warned Mu‘āwiya by letter saying (Sayf’s version): “The inhabitants of Kūfa have packed off to you a few born troublemakers; frighten them, grapple with them . . .” Mu‘āwiya received them and argued with them. In Sayf’s version he said: “You have attained honour (*sharaf*) in Islam, you have conquered peoples, you are in possession of their rank and their heritage. It has reached me that you hold a grudge against the Quraysh, but if it were not for them, you would return [to your dwelling-places] as lowly as you were.” When they behaved in an uncivilized manner in the ensuing dispute—according to Wāqidī they even took Mu‘āwiya by the beard—he flew into a rage and inveighed against one of them (Sayf’s version): “As for you, Ṣaṣa‘a, your village (*qaryatuka*) is the worst of all villages of the Arabs, it has the most stinking vegetation<sup>2</sup>), it has the deepest *wādī*, it is most notorious for its sins, it has the lowliest neighbours, no *sharīf* ever lived in it, if someone lowly ever went to live there he would be reviled for doing so and this would mean a blemish [on his reputation]. The inhabitants [of this village] acquired the most revolting names (*laqabs*) and the most ignoble sons-in-law . . .” And so on.

Then Mu‘āwiya wrote to ‘Uthmān telling him how he felt about those *musayyarūn*. In Sayf’s version: “People have come to me, they have no brains nor religion. Islam has made them troublesome and

1) Cf. Ya‘qūbī, *Ta‘rīkh*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma, Leiden 1883, II, p. 173 f.

2) In Arabic: *antanubā nabtan*; Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-kāmil fī ‘t-ta‘rīkh*, ed. C. J. Tornberg, Leiden 1867-’76, III, p. 110, has *baytan* instead of *nabtan*.

righteousness has made them restless. In no way do they want God, they do not talk sense. Their only concern is disturbing the peace [while coveting] the riches of the *abl adh-dhimma*." In a variant of this letter we find the meaningful words as recorded by Wāqidī: "You (i.e. 'Uthmān) have sent me people who speak with tongues of devils and what these dictate to them<sup>1</sup>). They come—they say—*min qibal al-qur'ān*<sup>2</sup>)." In the first instance I was inclined to emend this text by dropping the final *nūn* of *qur'ān* and read *min qibal al-qurā*, 'from the villages'. But I had to dismiss this idea because of other arguments that will be discussed below. Thus, if we take this line literally, we must translate 'on behalf of the Qur'ān'. This interpretation conveys that they see—or, in any case, pretend to see—themselves as having a special affinity with the Qur'ān, or maybe even as reciters. This may seem improbable, however, inasmuch as in the various accounts of this episode there are hardly any references to the Qur'ān, let alone the recitation thereof, in connection with these people. It is true, in Sayf's version we find on one occasion that Mu'āwiya visited these people and saw them teaching each other how to recite the Qur'ān<sup>3</sup>). On the other hand, they are so reviled as stupid and troublesome, and their lowly descent is emphasized in such unmistakable terms—think of the passage with the word *qarya*—that I am inclined to see them not as exponents of a socially distinguished class of people who through their knowledge of the Qur'ān are examples to their fellow-Muslims, but as a lowly class of people which is generally despised. Moreover, it says in the texts: they are *called* the *qurrā'*, it does not say: they *were* the *qurrā'*. Having arrived at this point I am inclined to follow Shaban's suggestion, interpret the word *qurrā'* as if it were a derivative of *Qāf-Rā'-Yā'* and render it 'villagers'.

One may ask: But what is the explanation for the fact that until now

1) In this description one is strongly reminded of the spirits through which soothsayers speak, cf. Julius Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, sec. ed., Berlin 1897, p. 134, note 2.

2) Also quoted by Hinds, p. 359.

3) Cf. I, p. 2925. Although the word 'Qur'ān' is missing, the context makes it obvious in my eyes that it was not an ordinary reading lesson which was meant.

practically everybody has taken this frequently occurring term to mean 'Qur'ān reciters'? Is there perhaps a different way of looking at this term so that it conveys both meanings simultaneously? Shaban ventures the opinion that the *qurrā'* themselves may have encouraged the ambiguity of their appellative in order 'to enhance their ever waning prestige' <sup>1)</sup>. It is regrettable that Shaban does not adduce evidence for this tempting solution. However, I think it can be corroborated by internal evidence provided by the account of the same episode in Ibn A'tham's *Kitāb al-futūḥ*. This account is based upon the versions of various authorities <sup>2)</sup> which Ibn A'tham amalgamated into one continuous story <sup>3)</sup>.

Thus Ibn A'tham relates how Sa'īd b. al-Āṣ as newly appointed governor entered Kūfa and officially invited the nobles (*asbrāf*) and those who could recite the Qur'ān to pass the time with him, because, as he said, "... those who can recite the Qur'ān best I love most". It is obvious that Ibn A'tham, while putting his history together, stumbled here upon the word *qurrā'* which he apparently took to mean 'reciters'. After the quarrel, an account of which was given above, Sa'īd wrote to 'Uthmān: "... together with al-Ashtar are people *yaz' amūna annabum al-qurrā' wa-hum as-sufabā'*" (who pretend that they are the *qurrā'* whereas [in reality] they are the foolish (or: ignorant) ones). We have no reason to assume that Ibn A'tham should have drastically altered the text of this letter, as it was transmitted to him. Moreover, the wording is more or less supported by Abū Mikhnaf's version quoted above. Taken literally this sentence means that those people, those *qurrā'*, liked others to think that they were Qur'ān reciters, but that their pretensions did not meet with general acceptance. Then, after they had been expelled, those of their fellow-*qurrā'* who had stayed behind in Kūfa wrote a letter to 'Uthmān complaining about the lot of their banished brethren. From other sources (Abū Mikhnaf, Balādhurī) we know that the signatories, whose names are preserved, belonged to the so-called

1) Cf. p. 51.

2) For a list of these, see p. 147 ff of vol. II, Hyderabad 1969.

3) II, p. 169-183.

*qurrā'* of Kūfa. Ibn A'tham, however, quotes his authority as saying: "... *min qurā'* (villages) *abl al-Kūfa'*"<sup>1</sup>). Here, in other words, we find the chronicler referring to these signatories by the obviously well-known designation 'villagers'.

When 'Uthmān had read the letter he asked the messenger who had brought it: "Who are these people who wrote this letter?" The messenger, of whom we know that he was one of those Kūfan *qurrā'*, answered, once more keeping up the pretence: "They are people from among the pious (*ṣalabā'*) of the inhabitants of Kūfa, from among its *qurrā'* and its people of religion and merit<sup>2</sup>)." Am I justified in concluding that Ibn A'tham's version offers the necessary evidence for the assertion that in those days the *qurrā'* were still known as 'villagers' but, as already suggested by Shaban, were trying hard to make people think of them as Qur'ān reciters?<sup>3</sup>

Further arguments in favour of the theory that these people were not reciters of the Qur'ān are provided *e silentio*. Is it not bizarre that the celebrated leader of the *musayyarūn*, Mālik al-Ashtar, never resorts to quoting fiery passages from the Qur'ān when addressing his soldiers before they go into battle<sup>4</sup>? Neither does Yazīd b. Qays<sup>5</sup>), another famous so-called Qur'ān reciter. On the other hand, 'Alī intersperses

1) II, p. 180.

2) II, p. 183.

3) Cf. Ṭabarī, I, p. 3369, for a report on the authority of Abū Mikhnaf in which 'Alī expressed himself in vehement language against the Khawārij among whom there were a great number of so-called *qurrā'*: "... *al-mujrimīna 'lladhīna laysū bi-qurrā'in li 'l-qur'ān* ... (. . . blackguards who are not reciters of the Qur'ān . . .). Cf. also Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, Cairo 1313, III, p. 468.

In later sources we still find traces of confusion concerning the *qurrā'*. The following report from Ibn Māja's *Sunan*, ed. M. Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī, I, p. 94, no. 256, leaves space for a few speculations as to what sort of people are meant by the word *qurrā'* as used in this context: "... *yā rasūl Allāh, wa-man yadkbulubu? Qāla: u'idda li 'l-qurrā'i 'l-murā'ina bi-a'mālibim. Wa-inna min abghaḍi 'l-qurrā'i ilā 'llābi 'lladhīna yazūrūna 'l-umarā'a* [ . . . ] *al-jawarata*. (O Messenger of God, who will enter this [sc. a certain deep spot in Hell]? He said: it has been prepared for the *qurrā'* who make a show of their works. Verily, to the *qurrā'* whom God hates most belong those who pay visits to despotic princes.)

4) E.g. cf. Ṭabarī, I, p. 3294.

5) Cf. Naṣr b. Muzāḥim, *Waq'at Ṣiffīn*, ed. 'Abd as-Salām M. Hārūn, sec. impr., Cairo 1382, p. 247 f.

his talks with numerous quotations. Furthermore, nowhere do we find anyone of the *qurrā'* mentioned in connection with the different *qirā'āt* of the Qur'ān, except al-Ḥārith b. 'Abd Allāh al-A'war and 'Alqama b. Qays an-Nakha'ī<sup>1</sup>).

\* \* \*

Assuming, then, that the theory that *qurrā'* may mean 'villagers' is tenable, the following questions should be asked: Why did the 'villagers' in Islam, the *qurrā'* or the *ahl al-qurā'*, have such a bad reputation? Why are they called stupid, ignorant and lowly? And who are they?

The *Lisān al-'arab* sub voce *QRY* informs us that *qaryatum* 'village, town', with its inhabitant *qārin*, is opposed to *bādiyatun* 'desert' and its inhabitant *bādin*. In this opposition we clearly discern the eternal dichotomy between the sedentary and the nomadic way of life of the Arabs. However, nothing indicates that *qarya* stands for something disreputable. If we look into the Qur'ān, on the other hand, we find something entirely different.

It appears that *qarya*, with its plural *qurā'*, occurs fifty-seven times in the Qur'ān, fifty times of which in a context where it has a distinctly pejorative connotation. It mostly indicates the city of unbelieving, stubborn and wicked people, for example Mecca, Sodom, Antioch and the cities of Shu'ayb, the 'Ād and the Thamūd. Mecca bears the honorific *Umm al-qurā'*, 'the mother of villages', because, according to Muslim exegesis, it is the *qibla* of the *ahl al-qurā'*, their place of pilgrimage, of assembly, and it is the village of the highest esteem of all. Two different reasons are given for this designation, (1) because the earth was leveled under it and (2) because the first house was built there<sup>2</sup>). The ratio of occurrences of the word in a pejorative sense in the Meccan *sūras* as compared with the Medinan *sūras* is four to one.

When we investigate the occurrence of the word *madīna* in the Qur'ān, we see that it also occurs in a pejorative sense in the Meccan *sūras*, two

1) Ibn al-Jazarī, *Das biographische Lexicon der Koranlehrer*, ed. G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl, Leipzig 1933-'5, nos. 923 and 2135.

2) Baydāwī, *Anwār at-tanzīl wa-asrār at-ta'wīl*, ed. H. O. Fleischer, Leipzig 1846-'8, I, p. 299(VI, 92).

times namely, one of which is notable (XXXVI, 20), because there it is used as a synonym of a sinful *qarya*. The word *madīna* occurs nine times in all the Meccan *sūras*, and this proves that Muḥammad knew the word before the Hijra. After the Hijra, when Muḥammad's mission had failed in two *qaryas*, Mecca and Ṭā'if, he settled in Yathrib, and as from that time the word *madīna* is no longer used in the Qur'ān in a pejorative sense. The significance of the term *madīna* in Muḥammad's political thinking justifies, I think, a brief digression which is closely linked to the present discussion.

We may assume that, when Muḥammad heard the word *madīna* for the first time in his life, he thought it to be the equivalent of the word *qarya* in his mother tongue. Differently put, the term *qarya*, which the Arabs in Mecca used to indicate a settlement the inhabitants of which led a sedentary life, was in Muḥammad's eyes synonymous with the word *madīna* the non-Arabs used. This word was probably introduced into Arabia from the Aramaic by Jews and/or Christians. In general, people seem to recognize synonymity of one term of their own vernacular with another term from a different language—or, at least, a different language area—more easily than the synonymity of two words which are both part of their own everyday speech.

We may also assume that it did not escape the prophet that the word *madīna* had a peculiar, additional connotation, the connotation 'area of jurisdiction'<sup>1</sup>). It may seem obvious to grant the Jews of Yathrib the credit of having taught Muḥammad this additional meaning, but it is even more plausible that the Jews or the Christians in Mecca had already acquainted him with it in the course of time. After all, the word *madīna*, with its plural *mada'in*, occurs rather frequently in the Meccan *sūras* and it is a striking fact that, with one exception, everytime it emerges, it is in a context based upon Jewish or Christian legend. As we have seen, after the Hijra it lost its pejorative sense altogether.

After Muḥammad had realized that the term *madīna* also had the meaning 'area of jurisdiction', the word seems to have begun to play a role of its own in his *Gedankenwelt*. This role could be reconstructed

1) Cf. EI<sup>1</sup>, s.v. *madīna* (Buhl).

as follows. Muḥammad may not have fully grasped what an 'area of jurisdiction' stood for, but it might have filled him with awe and later with inspiration. At a certain moment he was approached by a few tribesmen from far-away Yathrib. For the Arabs of Yathrib the prophet's preachings in Mecca may not have implied more than the activities of a representative of the class of *kāhins*. Islam, as a cause, probably did not convey much to them, but for Muḥammad they had begun to feel the respect one feels for the soothsayer whose advice or oracle one trusts. When the tribes Aws and Khazraj sought the intervention of this Meccan *kāhin* to fulfil the function of arbitrator (*ḥakam*)<sup>1</sup>), Muḥammad accepted and, allegedly, converted the Awsite and Khazrajite negotiators to Islam immediately. It is likely that, at that point, he felt elated for, among other reasons, the following two:

(1). The social status that went with the position of *ḥakam* between tribes was much higher than the status he was ever likely to attain in Mecca. That meant that the making of converts to his cause might prove easier.

(2). In Yathrib there were many Jews who, contrary to the Jews in Mecca, lived in *qaryas* of their own. Could it be, Muḥammad might have thought, that in those Jewish *qaryas* he would find some sort of realization of what he thought was an 'area of jurisdiction', a *madīna*? And if the polity in the Jewish *qaryas* proved to be a satisfactory one, might he not be able to use it as an example while building a community for himself consisting of the Arab *qaryas* which had sought his arbitration?

It is even likely that Muḥammad toyed with the idea of creating one vast 'area of jurisdiction'—in whatever way he interpreted this term<sup>2</sup>)—consisting of all the *qaryas* of Yathrib, including the Jewish ones. This idea is not merely conjectural. It should be borne in mind that Muḥammad in all likelihood felt to be, or at least may have felt capable of squeezing himself into the role of, a Jewish prophet, who would once

1) *Kāhins* were often asked to intervene between two competing parties, cf. Toufic Fahd, *La divination arabe . . .*, Strasbourg 1966, p. 118.

2) Perhaps cf. the 'Constitution of Medina', see W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford 1956, p. 221-225.

more lead the Jewish tribes of Yathrib. Apart from that he was going to fulfil the function of arbitrator/leader of the Arab tribes at the same time. Muḥammad is alleged to have argued with the Jews, his main argument having been the position of Abraham as common ancestor of Jews and Arabs and founder of the first monotheism. The Jews laughed at him and refused to recognize in him a new Jewish prophet. This is aptly illustrated by *sūra* IV, 150, which says: "... we (i.e. the Jews) believe in some (prophets) and disbelieve in others<sup>1)</sup>". Also those of the Arab tribesmen, the so-called *munāfiqūn*, who could not make up their minds whether or not to commit themselves to Muḥammad on the latter's terms, thwarted his plans. Nevertheless, in the economic unity which Muḥammad sought to create in Yathrib<sup>2)</sup>, mainly in order to compete more effectively with Mecca, we should discern an adumbration of the utopian polity which may have floated before his mind when he thought of the term *madīna*.

After this digression the discussion about *qarya* is resumed.

In his biography we observe that, after having settled in Yathrib, Muḥammad was driven also by distinctly social motives apart from political, economic and religious ones. However, in the very beginning Yathrib was in the eyes of Muḥammad still a *qarya* such as Mecca, as is shown in a tradition preserved in Bukhārī<sup>3)</sup> where it says: "*Umirtu bi-qaryatin ta'kulu 'l-qurā*" (I was ordered to [resort to] a *qarya* that devours [other] *qaryas*). In later years the name Madīnat an-nabī superseded the name Yathrib<sup>4)</sup>, and the word *madīna*, apart from its Aramaic connotation discussed above, came to mean something different from *qarya*, as is supported by the following report from Ibn Ḥanbal, in which someone asks someone else: "*A-fī madīnatin taskunu aw fī*

1) For once I did not quote Arberry's translation, inasmuch as his rendering happens to obscure my argument.

2) Cf. Shaban, p. 11 f, who calls it a 'commonwealth'.

3) *Faḍā'il al-madīna*, 2. Whether this tradition is authentic or not is irrelevant. It reflects a mentality of the prophet which, historically speaking, is highly feasible.

4) Although *sūra* XXXIII, 13, proves that Yathrib as a name was still in use as late as the year 6/627.

*qaryatin qāla lā bal fī qaryatin*” (Do you live in a *madīna* or in a *qarya*? He said: No, in a *qarya*<sup>1</sup>).

The ‘*qarya* that devours other *qaryas*’ constitutes in actual fact an apt description of what happened in the cluster of *qaryas* which we call Medina. We should consider the dwelling-places of the different Arab and Jewish tribes as different *qaryas*. One of these, or rather a small group of these, acquired the hegemony over the adjacent ones. From the Qur’ān and the traditional exegesis we can form a clear idea of how we must picture a *qarya* which was ‘devoured’ by Muḥammad and his followers. It concerns the *qarya* of the Jewish tribe Naḍir, which was situated at a distance of two miles from that part of Medina where Muḥammad lived. In *sūra* LIX, 14<sup>2</sup>), with comments by Baydāwī<sup>3</sup>), it says: “They (i.e. the Jews and the *munāfiqūn*) will not fight against you all together (i.e. assembled and in agreement) except in fortified cities [in Arabic: *quran muḥaṣṣanatin*] (i.e. fortified with gates [*durūb*] and trenches [*khanādiq*]), or from behind walls<sup>4</sup>) (i.e. because of [their] extreme propensity for privacy). Their valour is great, among themselves; you think of them as a host; but their hearts are scattered; that is because they are a people who have no sense.” Is it not as if we hear this text again, when Mu‘āwiya, ‘Uthmān and Sa‘īd b. al-‘Āṣ speak disparagingly about those people who call themselves *qurrā*’ as quoted above?

It appeared from the *Lisān al-‘arab* that *qarya* is contrasted with *badw*, ‘desert’, as noted above. From this we may conclude that the inhabitants of a *qarya* attained a higher social status and, accordingly, may be called to belong to the *ḥādīr*, ‘the sedentary’. In Ṭabarī there is a report in which a group of nomads is told by a group of villagers that they themselves are more skilled in fighting other villagers than nomads

1) Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, Cairo 1313, VI, p. 445.

2) Cf. Richard Bell, *Sūrat al-ḥaṣr*; a study of its composition, in: MW, XXXVIII, 1948, p. 29-42, who thinks that the *sūra* does not treat only of the Banū Naḍir.

3) Ed. Fleischer, II, p. 323; cf. Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, Cairo 1954-7, XXVIII, p. 47 f.

4) The description thus far fits the present-day settlements of semi-nomads in the vicinity of a city such as Tehran; cf. also *The Cambridge history of Iran*, vol. I, Cambridge 1968, p. 425 f. For a description of Medina at the time of the battle of Uḥud, see Wāqidi, *K. al-maghāzī*, ed. J. M. B. Jones, I, p. 210, line 14.

would ever be. The nomads retort that they know what fighting is, whereas villagers do not<sup>1</sup>). On the other hand, a tradition attributed to the prophet shows that the *ahl al-qurā* are identified with nomadic customs. The eating of lizards, said the prophet, is called *qarawīyun*<sup>2</sup>); the *ahl al-qurā*, the people of solitary estates (*diyā'*) and the nomads of the desert eat lizards, city people (*ahl al-mudun*) do not do that<sup>3</sup>). One is almost inclined to recognize in the word *qarawīyun* a forerunner of the modern Egyptian term *baladi*.

I venture the opinion that a city such as Kūfa must have had its *qaryas* scattered around the city centre, or consisted of a cluster of *qaryas* just like Medina<sup>4</sup>). People who drifted from Medina to Kūfa were shown dwelling-places in the *qaryas*. When, for example, the *musayyarūm* had returned to Kūfa, the then governor Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī made them settle again (*wa-sakkana Abū Mūsā 'n-nās*)<sup>5</sup>). It is feasible that the same happened to all the new converts from the desert, to whom Muḥammad assigned dwelling-places in the *qaryas* that were deserted by the Jewish tribes Qaynuqā', Naḍir and Qurayza. Muḥammad must have been fully aware that he could only gain power if he had his followers in one strong, organized body in his immediate vicinity. It is probably the reason why, in a way even more sweeping than in Mecca, everything nomadic came to be considered inferior to the sedentary way of life. Inasmuch as the new inhabitants of, among others, the former Jewish *qaryas* had until recently been nomads, with many of the visible<sup>6</sup>) and

1) Ṭabarī, I, p. 1946, also quoted in Shaban, p. 23. In later years the dichotomy between the sedentary and the nomadic was widened, as appears in the tradition literature. In Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, ed. M. Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī, Cairo 1952, *aḥkām* 13, and Abū Dā'ūd, *Sunan*, ed. M. Muḥyī 'd-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, Cairo (± 1935), III, p. 306, it says that the testimony of a bedouin is not acceptable as evidence against a *ṣāḥib al-qarya*.

2) In R. P. A. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, s.v. *qarya*, it says: *qarawīyun* = (a.o.) *ahl al-bādiya*.

3) *Lisān al-'arab*, s.v. *qry*, taken from Ibn al-Athīr's *An-nihāya fī gharīb al-ḥadīth wa'l-aḥbar*, cf. ed. Maḥmūd aṭ-Ṭanāḥī and Ṭāhir az-Zāwī, Cairo 1963-'5, IV, p. 57.

4) Cf. also *Middle Eastern Cities. A symposium . . .*, ed. by Ira M. Lapidus, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1969, p. 34 as compared with p. 64.

5) Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-asbrāf*, V, p. 47.

6) Cf. e.g. the consumption of lizards as mentioned above.

audible<sup>1)</sup> characteristics of the nomadic way of life, they were looked down upon in spite of their conversion to Islam. And thus the term *abl al-qurā* or, if we accept Shaban's theory and the additional evidence provided in the foregoing pages, the term *qurrā'*, received a derogatory connotation, grafted on the language of the Qur'ān and kept alive by social considerations. Whether or not the inhabitants of *qaryas* were considered to be leading a sedentary life, their social status was eclipsed by that of the *madīna*-dwellers<sup>2)</sup>.

\* \* \*

Until now we have seen how the interpretation of the term *qurrā'* resulted in confusion. There is another important episode in the early history of Islam in which a group of people emerged who, in various texts, were called *qurrā'*. It might be interesting to see what the term conveys in that context. The course of events referred to is taken from a period of Islamic history much earlier than the one we have been dealing with above, a period when Muḥammad's prestige had not yet reached its peak. It concerns the Muslims—forty or seventy in number—who were massacred at Bi'r Ma'ūna in the year 4 of the Hijra, shortly after the battle of Uḥud. They had been sent out by Muḥammad as 'missionaries'—to use W. Montgomery Watt's term—to a tribe in order to make the tribesmen better acquainted with the cause of Islam. After having been suddenly attacked from an ambush all but two died as martyrs<sup>3)</sup>.

When we consult a few of the earliest Muslim sources that deal with this episode, we observe that the designation by which these martyrs are indicated differs considerably in the various texts.

1) Cf. Ṭabarī, I, p. 2909, line 15, p. 2913, line 12 and p. 2920, line 8, where time after time, in different words, their defective or unintelligible ways of expression are emphasized.

2) For more data on the opposition *madīna/qarya*, the reader is referred to two papers in: *Middle Eastern Cities*, ed. I. M. Lapidus, p. 47-79 and p. 122-158.

3) For a clear presentation of the political background, see Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, p. 31 f. One may disagree with Watt on the term 'missionary'. I personally would prefer the word 'emissary'. To go into this matter more profoundly would take too long, although it does not lack relevance in the present discussion.

Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767)—collective *isnād*—: *min kbiyār al-muslimīn* (from the best Muslims), and: *musammayna min kbiyār al-muslimīn* (they were named the best of the Muslims) <sup>1</sup>).

Wāqidī (d. 207/823)—collective *isnād*—: *shababatun yusammawna 'l-qurrā'* (young men called the *qurrā'*) <sup>2</sup>).

Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845)—collective *isnād*—: 1. the same as Wāqidī, 2. *wa-kānū yud'awna fīna 'l-qurrā'* (among ourselves they used to be called the *qurrā'*) <sup>3</sup>).

Khalifa b. Khayyāt (d. 240/854): the same as Ibn Ishāq <sup>4</sup>).

Balādhurī (d. 279/892): no designation in his *Ansāb al-asbrāf*.

Ya'qūbī (d. 284/897)—no *isnād*—: ... *wa-nafaran min aṣḥābihi fī tis'atin wa-'isbrīna* (sic) *'āmmatubum badrīyun* (... and a group of twenty-nine (sic) of his Companions most of whom had been present at the battle of Badr) <sup>5</sup>).

Ṭabarī (d. 310/923)—collective *isnād*—: *musammayna min kbiyār al-muslimīn* (they were named the best of the Muslims) <sup>6</sup>).

In the *ḥadīth* collections we find designations some of which are more or less similar to those just mentioned. For example, in Ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad* we read: *kunnā nusammihimi 'l-qurrā' fī zamānihim* (in those days we used to call them the *qurrā'*) <sup>7</sup>). On the other hand, we also find designations that are greatly embellished, for example: *yuqālu labumu 'l-qurrā'* (they were called the *qurrā'*) and then the following description is added: ... they recited the Qur'ān and together they studied it by night. During the day they used to bring water to the mosque. They also used to gather firewood which they traded for food for the *abl aṣ-ṣuffa* and the poor <sup>8</sup>).

1) Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen 1858-'60, p. 648 f.

2) Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, ed. J. M. B. Jones, London 1966, I, p. 347.

3) Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb at-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, ed. E. Sachau a.o., Leiden 1905-'17, II 1, p. 36 and 38.

4) Khalifa b. Khayyāt, *Ta'riḥ*, ed. al-Akram Ḍiyā' al-'Umarī, Najaf 1967, p. 38.

5) *Ta'riḥ*, II, p. 75.

6) I, p. 1443.

7) *Musnad*, Cairo 1313, III, p. 255.

8) *Musnad*, III, p. 270; Muslim, ed. M. Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī, Cairo 1955-'6, III, p. 1511.

From these examples it may have become evident that interpreting the term *qurrā'* from the foregoing quotations as referring to Qur'ān reciters is probably wrong in spite of the last text cited from Ibn Ḥanbal. Various considerations regarding this last text, at any rate, should be taken into account.

The historicity of the *abl aṣ-ṣuffa*, at least the fact that they were all poverty-stricken, is put to doubt by Watt<sup>1</sup>). The report is probably a pious invention, studded with unhistorical embellishments, of a date much later than the ones cited first. This contention is supported by the sequel of the quotation from Wāqidi which was given above. In this sequel there is a description of the young people 'who were called the *qurrā'*' which closely resembles the report in Ibn Ḥanbal. I will give a translation of it, inasmuch as I think that it may have been the original, old description of the *qurrā'* on the basis of which the description in Ibn Ḥanbal developed into its present form. Thus it says in Wāqidi: "When evening had fallen they used to go to a section of Medina in order to study together and to perform the *ṣalāt*. Then, when morning had come, they used to draw sweet water and gather firewood, which they brought to the private quarters of the Messenger of God—may God bless him and grant him peace. Their relatives used to think that they stayed in the mosque, whereas the people of the mosque used to think that these people stayed with their relatives." As is evident from this account, there appeared to be some doubt with their fellow-Medinese as to the questions where exactly their dwelling-places were and exactly what they did for a living. They certainly emerge from this account as a nondescript lot, who earn their living by menial labour and who, apparently, had no connection with either trade or land cultivating.

Furthermore, it should be remarked that it is unlikely that there were already as many as forty—or seventy—people in those days who could recite all, or many of the, Qur'anic revelations in a way that earned them the honorific Qur'ān reciters. This I find all the more improbable, inasmuch as I cannot conceive of Muḥammad being so

1) Cf. EI<sup>2</sup>, s.v. *abl aṣ-ṣuffa*.

careless as to send away together on a dangerous mission a—what must have been major—contingent of those followers who could recite the Qur'ān. And suppose for the sake of argument that this is what actually happened, why do we not find in the sources any indication of so much knowledge of the Qur'ān having been wasted? Why would Muḥammad jeopardize the lives of so many members of his cadre? In addition to all this it could be argued that it is strange that not one of the casualties is mentioned in the biographical dictionaries as having had any knowledge of the Qur'ān, whereas their martyr's death at Bī'r Ma'ūna appears to be generally known. Of the nineteen people mentioned by Wāqidī<sup>1)</sup> only two are referred to by Ibn Ḥajar<sup>2)</sup> as having embraced Islam relatively early; the majority was converted after the Hijra. Ibn Ḥajar names one person even whose conversion to Islam took place only *after* the battle of Uḥud, that means a mere four months before he met his death at Bī'r Ma'ūna<sup>3)</sup>.

Thus, if these *qurrā'* were not reciters of the Qur'ān, who were they? Were they 'villagers'? In other words, did this group of people consist mainly of late converts to Islam, to whom the prophet had assigned dwelling-places in the various *qaryas* which together formed Medina? Although extremely doubtful, this may have been the case with those people slaughtered at Bī'r Ma'ūna who are *not* listed in the sources, but, in any case, the numbers forty or seventy are probably exaggerated figures. Of those who were listed twelve were from the tribe Khazraj, three from Aws, and four from the tribes Ghaṭafān, Sulaym, Kināna and Khuzā'i respectively. These last four may, in actual fact, also be considered as answering the description *qurrā'*, 'villagers' as expounded above. As for the Khazrajites and the Awsites, although they belonged to those tribes that sought the arbitrage of Muḥammad in the first place and formed the main contingent of his followers in Yathrib, who received the honorific Anṣār, they used to be no more than *qarya*

1) *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, I, p. 352 f.

2) 'Āmir b. Fuḥayra, cf. Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-iṣāba fī tamyīz aṣ-ṣaḥāba*, Cairo 1939, II, p. 247, and Nāfi' b. Budayl, cf. III, p. 514.

3) Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-iṣāba*, II, p. 517.

dwellers before Muḥammad came to Yathrib and before he endeavoured to change the cluster of *qaryas*, that was Yathrib, into a *madīnat an-nabī*, whatever, as outlined above, he may have meant by it. Of all the *qurrā'* mentioned by Wāqidi no one gets more than a mediocre appraisal in Ibn Ḥajar's *Iṣāba*. Most of them are dealt with in one line<sup>1</sup>).

All these arguments together may point to the plausibility of the interpretation of the term *qurrā'* as 'villagers'. It is virtually impossible to interpret the word otherwise in a report in Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt* which runs: *Inna unāsan min ḥamqā qurrā'ikum yaz'amūna anna khibāba 'l-liḥā ḥarām* (Certain people from among the stupidest of your *qurrā'* claim that the dying of beards is forbidden, III 1, p. 150). The term *khibyār al-muslimīn* probably stands for no more than 'good, upright Muslims', the word *khibyār* conveying something favourable about the strength of their faith rather than about their social backgrounds. But for all that has been said above, we still do not know how the confusion about the interpretation of the term *qurrā'* originated. It is therefore justifiable to ask whether the connotation 'villagers' may have given rise, or at least may be in any way related to, the connotation 'Qur'ān reciters'. Replying to this question is a hazardous task. For once there is no conclusive evidence whatsoever, at least that I can think of, upon which a theory could be founded. Nevertheless I venture a theory which I should like to expound with all due caution. This theory was inspired by the following considerations.

On the occasion of the forty—or seventy—so-called *qurrā'* being slaughtered at Bi'r Ma'ūna a revelation was sent down. This revelation was for some time considered to be part of the Qur'ān. After that it was abrogated or forgotten<sup>2</sup>). This apocryphal revelation runs: *Ballighū 'annā qawmanā annā (qad) laqīnā rabbanā fa-raḍīya 'annā wa-arḍānā* or in a variant *wa-raḍīnā 'anhu* (Inform our people about us that we have

1) In the *ghaḥwat ar-Rajī'*, the campaign after that of Bi'r Ma'ūna, Muḥammad sent another group of his Companions to a nomadic tribe in the desert in order to call them to Islam, cf. Wāqidi, p. 354. These Companions are not called *qurrā'* and are not listed in Ibn Ḥajar's *Iṣāba* as having had any special knowledge of the Qur'ān.

2) Cf. Ibn Sa'd, II 1, p. 38, line 11.

met our Lord; He is satisfied with us and He has satisfied us, or: and we are satisfied with Him<sup>1</sup>)). It is certainly not astonishing that this text was eventually abrogated. It is indeed difficult to place this sentence in any Qur'anic context. I see no possibility other than to interpret this sentence as the last utterance of the victims at Bi'r Ma'ūna, facing death and leaving a last message for their kinsmen. The tone of the utterance is somewhat solemn, and it is not unthinkable that this text came to be closely associated with what was known as 'recitation', be it the solemn recitation of the pre-Islamic *kābin* or the recitation of the heavenly revelations which the leader of the Muslims so often professed to have received from God. As was mentioned above, two people escaped death and eventually returned to Medina where they related the sad events. The prophet is alleged to have invoked God's wrath against the dastardly murderers during a considerable number of days after the news had been broken to him<sup>2</sup>). I venture the opinion with all the necessary prudence of someone who knows that he has no positive evidence at his disposal that perhaps the solemnly uttered, or should I say 'recited', last words of the martyrs, the so-called *qurrā'*, at Bi'r Ma'ūna, in close association with the prophet's constant imprecations came to be considered as a *qur'ān*, a part of the heavenly revelation, that is: a text which is recited. Then, a considerable time after that event, the original meaning 'villagers' of the word *qurrā'* in this context having become obsolete, the association with the reciting of what was thought to be part of the Qur'ān caused the word to be misunderstood as a derivation of the root *QR'*. It is on the basis of these flimsy arguments that I dare formulate the theory that thus the term *qurrā'*, which originally meant 'villagers', may have come by its connotation 'Qur'ān reciters'.

1) Cf. Ibn Sa'd, II 1, p. 38; Wāqidi, I, p. 350; cf. also Nöldeke/Schwally, *Geschichte des Qurāns*, I, p. 246.

2) Cf. Muslim, I, p. 468.