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INTRODUCTION SCHOLARS' PERSPECTIVES ON AHMAD IBN YAHYA'S NISBA "AL-BALADHURI"

Abstract. *This article examines the historical origins of the nisba "al-Baladhuri" attributed to the ninth-century historian Ahmad ibn Yahya. It analyses the medieval perspectives linking the name either to the consumption of a medicinal plant or to a geographic toponym, and concludes in favour of a botanical origin.*

Keywords: *al-Baladhuri, Ahmad ibn Yahya, nisba, Islamic historiography, Abbasid Caliphate, medieval historians, Ibn al-Nadim, Semecarpus anacardium, marking nut, botanical origin, toponymy, Baghdad, historical sources, narrative approach, Arab conquests.*

INTRODUCTION

During the eighth and ninth centuries, historical scholarship emerged in the Abbasid Caliphate alongside the disciplines of tafsir (exegesis), kalam (theology), hadith (prophetic traditions) and fiqh (jurisprudence). Historians of this era primarily employed a narrative approach to historical documentation. Events of the seventh century were recounted on the basis of oral narratives transmitted through chroniclers (rawis). Since these reports were largely compiled by scholars and by representatives of various religious factions and groups, they were frequently subject to excessive subjective interpretation. Consequently, when analysing historical sources written during the eighth and ninth centuries, it is crucial to pay particular attention to the author's affiliation with specific religious groups and social strata.

In the study of early Islamic history, the works of historians such as Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Madani (699–769), Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham (d. 833), Muhammad ibn

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Umar al-Waqidi (747–823), Ali ibn Muhammad al-Mada'ini (752–843), Muhammad ibn Sa'd (784–845), Khalifa ibn Khayyat (d. 854) and Ahmad ibn Yahya al-Baladhuri (d. 892) are of paramount importance.

MAIN PART

Ahmad ibn Yahya ibn Jabir ibn Dawud al-Katib al-Baghdadi al-Baladhuri (d. 892) was the first to author a specialised historical work chronicling the conquest wars of the Arabs. It is conjectured that al-Baladhuri was of Persian origin. He was a poet and a historical chronicler who composed numerous satirical verses. Ahmad ibn Yahya was born and raised in Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid state. His kunya (patronymic) is recorded variously as Abu al-Abbas, Abu Ja'far, Abu al-Hasan or Abu Bakr.

According to Ibn al-Nadim, Ahmad ibn Yahya's nisba (attributive name) "al-Baladhuri" was associated with an illness he contracted in the latter part of his life. According to this account, Ahmad consumed the seeds of the baladhur (marking nut) plant, the potency of which induced delirium and mental depression, leading to his designation as "al-Baladhuri." While Ibn Asakir, Ibn al-Adim and Ibn Kathir also noted that Ahmad ibn Yahya suffered from mental depression toward the end of his life, they provided no information regarding the baladhur seed or the nisba Baladhuri. Conversely, Yaqut al-Hamawi reported that it was Ahmad ibn Yahya's grandfather, Jabir ibn Dawud, who consumed the baladhur fruit and subsequently acquired the name Baladhuri. On this basis it can be argued that the nisba Baladhuri was inherited by Ahmad ibn Yahya from his paternal ancestors. Muhammad ibn Shakir al-Kutbi and Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani echoed the viewpoint of Ibn al-Nadim.

Today, the baladhur tree is scientifically classified as *Semecarpus anacardium*. The tree grows naturally in the Himalayas and the tropical regions of India. The fruit of the baladhur tree is used in the preparation of detergents and was employed as a chemical fertiliser in the sixteenth century. *Semecarpus anacardium* is commonly referred to by Europeans as the "marking nut." When ripe, the fruit is pleasant and sweet; the black nut, however, is toxic, and its ingestion, or the contact of its resin with the skin, triggers severe allergic reactions. It is used medicinally to treat digestive disorders and to balance phlegm. The reddish-orange portion is harvested, sun-dried and consumed once semi-dried.

The Candidate of Historical Sciences G. Goipov asserted that during the ninth and tenth centuries there was a locality named "Baladur" in the Baghlan province of

Tokharistan, and that Ahmad ibn Yahya's grandfather migrated from this region to Baghdad, after which he and his descendants were given the nisba al-Baladhuri. This assertion, however, lacks scholarly validation. First, none of the medieval historians linked the nisba al-Baladhuri to a geographic toponym. Second, all historical works record the name specifically as al-Baladhuri; had it been derived from the aforementioned region, it would have appeared in the form al-Baladuri.

There were other scholars in the Middle Ages who produced works under the nisba Baladhuri. For instance, Abu Muhammad Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Tusi al-Baladhuri (d. 950) worked under this attribution. He was one of the prominent scholars of his time in the fields of hadith science and homiletics; the sources, however, do not specify the reason behind his acquisition of the nisba al-Baladhuri. Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi and Abu Sa'd al-Sam'ani (1113–1166) designated Ahmad ibn Yahya as “the Elder Baladhuri” (al-Baladhuri al-Kabir) and Abu Muhammad Ahmad ibn Muhammad as “the Younger Baladhuri” (al-Baladhuri al-Saghir). Nonetheless, no familial lineage or other connection between them is mentioned in the historical records.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be stated that the nisba al-Baladhuri was derived from the name of a plant, since this information is corroborated by nearly all the written sources. There is, however, no consensus among them regarding who exactly consumed the plant. Furthermore, the descriptions provided by botanical and medical specialists confirm its adverse effects on human health; nevertheless, it was consumed in consideration of its medicinal benefits. Finally, prominent scholars other than Ahmad ibn Yahya also achieved renown under the nisba al-Baladhuri.

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