

A Study in the Formation of a Term: Sahaba

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Abstract : The Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, the Sahaba, are regarded as the first link between him and later believers who did not know him or learn from him directly. This makes the Sahaba a link in the chain between God and the ummah (community). Apart from their role in spreading the Prophet's teachings, they came to be regarded as role models, representing the Islamic ideal of life as prescribed by the Prophet himself. According to Hadith, the Prophet had promised some Sahaba unqualified admission to paradise. It is commonly agreed that the Sahaba have the following attributes in common: God is well pleased with them; they will surely go to paradise; they are perfectly trustworthy; and they are the authorities from whom Muslims can learn all matters related to their religion. No other generation of Muslims has received the attention received by the Companions of the Prophet. In spite of the importance of the Sahaba in Islam, we still know comparatively little about them. There are at least two reasons for this. First, there is the overall scarcity of information surviving from the early period. At the death of the Prophet, it is said, there were more than 100,000 Companions. As we shall see, this is a complex issue, involving the definition of the term Sahaba. However, only few Companions of the Prophet are known to us. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, who wrote in the fifteenth century A.D., was only able to collect facts about 11,000 of them (including those whose status as Sahaba was disputed). Ibn Sa'd, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr and Ibn al-Athir, all of whom lived earlier than Ibn Hajar, included in their respective works fewer lives of Sahaba than he did. If we consider Ibn Hajar's Isaba as the most complete biographical account of the Sahaba that remains available, we have information, presumably, on approximately one tenth of them. The remaining nine tenths are apparently lost from the historical record. Second, discussion of the Sahaba tends to focus on those considered the most important among them such as 'Uthman, 'Ali and Mu'awiya, while others, who together number in the thousands, are less well-known. This paper will try to study the origins of the term Sahaba that became exclusive to the Companions of the Prophet and not a synonym of the word companions in general.

Keywords : companions, Hadith, Islamic history, Muhammad, Sahaba, transmission

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