

The Battle of Badr

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A Bedouin tribe stops at a palm tree lined oasis. All of a sudden, a loud yelling is heard from the west. Cresting a dune, men on camels, wearing flowing white robes thunder down at the tribe. Each rider swings a scimitar over his head, and ululates loudly. As the riders near the tribe, they veer off and begin to circle the oasis. The tribe forms a defensive circle, with the women and children in the middle. Suddenly, the riders stop circling and charge in to attack. No one is spared. Even the women and children are slaughtered. This is what people think of when they think of warfare in early Islam. Heartless warriors whose only purpose in life is to kill infidels. This is not the reality of history. In fact, Islamic warriors were not mindless. They methodically planned each attack, and stuck to their plan as much as possible. They were not heartless killers either. When Mohammed attacked Mecca, he did not kill a single civilian. In fact, no one was killed in the taking of Mecca. Early Islamic warriors fought for one thing: the right to practice their new religion.

When Islam was first beginning, Mohammed was being pressured the Umayyad, the ruling family of Mecca. They felt that their power and supremacy were being challenged. Several of Mohammed's followers were forced out of Mecca for practicing Islam. The Muslims then moved into the city of Medina to live. They were welcomed here by all people including the Jewish and non-Arab people. The only problem with living in Medina was that they were now cut-off from trading with other tribes. The trade

routes, which ran from Syria to Mecca, were controlled and protected by the Meccans. In order to engage in commerce, the Muslims decided to attack caravans along the trade route to obtain riches. There is even a Quranic text to support them in this philosophy.

To those against whom war is made

Permission is given (to those who fight) because they are wronged

And surely God is able to help them (Quran, 2:13) (Goldschmidt 2002)

Not only did the Muslims under Mohammed attack when they were believed incapable of it, they also attacked when it seemed the least likely. They started attacking during the month of the Arab pilgrimage to Mecca. The reason this was so unexpected is because the Arabs were forbidden to raid during this month, regardless of whether they were at war with a certain tribe or not. This was a blatant disregard of the “rules of war” by the Muslims that enraged not only the Meccans, but the Arab people as a whole. The Muslims felt that they were in the right because of a passage in the Quran. The Quran suggested that while people may question whether it is right to attack during the holy month of the pilgrimage, it was definitely wrong to expel people from Mecca and barring them from entering the Ka’ba (Goldschmidt 2002).

Tensions finally came to a head the second year after the emigration to Medina. The Muslims were about to attack another Umayyad caravan near the oasis of Badr. This caravan was not only rich in possessions, but was also carrying the possessions of those Muslims who had been tortured and expelled from Mecca. This was the caravan that the Muslims had been waiting for. Not only would it be a boost to the economy of Medina,

but it would also be a symbolic victory over the Meccans. It would be saying that not only could the Meccans not break the religion of the Muslims, but they could not even keep the riches of the Muslims away from the Muslims. What Mohammed did not know was that the Meccans, under the leadership of Abu Sufyan, were sending one thousand troops to protect the caravan. Mohammed had only 324 men under his command. In March 624 the armies of Abu Sufyan and Mohammed met at the oasis of Badr in between the cities of Mecca and Medina.

The army of Abu Sufyan contained 300 men on horses and 700 men on camels. The Muslim army had 70 camels and 2 horses (Mumineen.org). When the Muslims learned of the Meccan army marching toward Medina behind the caravan, they rode and marched out to meet it head on. The army of Abu Sufyan was also very well equipped with swordsmen, and archers. The Muslims were armed with what they had lying around. Some with swords, but others with implants for farming and herding camels. Mohammed chose a spot to place his base camp where he had command of the battlefield. When he started raiding a year earlier, he and his followers had known little about military or raiding tactics. Now Mohammed was picking the battlefield of his choice and using the battlefield to his advantage. This is a vast improvement on his skills as a leader and military strategist over a very short period of time (Mumineen.org).

The Muslims were arrayed with the well of Badr behind them and the thousand men of the Meccan army formed into ranks ahead of them. This was actually a very advanced strategy. The Badr wells are in a valley, with high walls on either side above

them. The Meccans were facing the south end of the valley, and had no avenue of retreat behind them. The army of Abu Sufyan had a large opening behind them. This actually worked out in favor of the Muslim army. By allowing the Meccans a way to retreat, the Muslims felt that they could turn the tide of the battle. Battle psychology dictates that if an army has an easy way out, and the tide of battle shifts, groups of men may begin to retreat. Once a retreat begins, it is very hard for commanders to stop this, and more and more men turn and run until it turns into a rout. If an army has no way to turn and run, that army will build up its resolve, and make a fight of it. Often armies backed into a corner will fight to the last man. Many times armies with no escape, win “against all odds.” This fight or die mentality is much stronger in armies with no escape. By putting his army in such a position, Mohammed was banking on this mentality forming in his troops. He was also allowing the armies of Abu Sufyan to escape if the tide turned (Mumineen.org).

With the two armies facing each other several men strode out in front of each army. Three men from the army of Abu Sufyan stood in front of their army and called for three men equal in skill to meet them in between the two armies for a duel. All three men from Mecca, Utbah Ibn Rabiah, his son Al Walid and his brother Sheibah, were related to the wife of Abu Sufyan and were leaders in the Meccan army (Shia.org). The warriors from the Muslim army were Ali, Ali Hamza, and Obeidah Al Harith (Mumineen.org). They paired off and began fighting. Utbah faced Ali Hamza, and Al Walid paired off against Al Walid. Both fighters from the Muslim army dispatched their opponents quickly, and then turned to help Obeidah, who was having a very difficult

fight with Sheibah. With all three Muslim warriors facing him, Sheibah had little chance. Eventually the Muslims killed him, but Sheibah got one final blow in on Obeidah and killed him by taking his leg (Shia.org).

Upon seeing their leaders die, the Meccans charged heedlessly into the Muslim lines. The leaders of the Meccans tried to stop this charge and regain their control over their men. They knew that a head long charge at an enemy with no where to run is suicidal. There is ample room to be outflanked, and for a rout, or even worse, a slaughter to happen. The leaders of the Meccans were hoping to take that anger over the killing of their leaders and harness it into a useful purposeful charge. The Muslims, however, stayed into formation, and didn't allow their emotions to overcome their strategy. They waited for the reckless charge of the Meccans to reach them (Mumineen.org).

Tactics at the time were for archers to pepper the lines of the enemy to soften them up for the foot soldiers. As the foot soldiers went forward at a steady pace, the archers would continue to fire to keep the enemy heads down. Being an archer in the Muslim army was a very respected position. It was a religious obligation for Muslim warriors to become expert archers, as the prophet Mohammed was an incredible archer. Not only was becoming an archer an obligation, the act of making the bow was a major religious experience. It took an entire year to make a bow, and was several steps. Bows were composite and made of wood on two sides, and animal horn in the middle to make it stronger. It was not exactly like we think of a longbow, but more in the shape of a U.

As the Meccans charged, the Muslims readied their weapons to meet the charge. The weapons of an early Muslim warrior were varied. It was pretty much limited to what they could grab. Because of earlier raids done by the Muslims, they now also had a vast array of military weapons. These included straight edged swords, known as the Kaskara, spears, lances, axes and daggers.

Early Islamic swords, unlike those in Hollywood's imagination, were straight edged. Scimitars, the curved swords that we often see, were not used by Muslim armies until the 15th century. During the Prophet Mohammed's time, the preferred sword was the Kaskara. This was a straight double edged sword that was about a yard long. These swords were fairly close copies of the European broadsword. While these swords had a point and were good for stabbing and thrusting, their primary use was slicing and cutting. The kaskara was carried horizontally on the shoulders. The blades were tempered steel and were renowned for their strength. Nearly every warrior carried a sword and Mohammed himself declared that "Swords are the key to Paradise. He who draws his sword in the path of God has sworn allegiance to God."

Spears and lances were carried by both the infantry and cavalry. The cavalry normally carried spears as they were for throwing and forgetting about. The cavalry would ride up at their enemies, release a salvo of spears, and then draw their kaskaras and charge. Lances were normally carried by infantry. The lances were usually between 6 and 8 feet long. They provided good protection from cavalry, as they could be extended from the lines and create a wall of lances well in front of the infantry. Any approaching

cavalry had to slow their charge and cut through the lances or risk having both their camels and themselves impaled. Axes were typically carried by those who could not afford, or did not own a kaskara. These axes were first just used for cutting wood, then were brought into battle, but after a time, these axes became more ornamental and were designed specifically for battle. Both double and single edged axes were used. Often a warrior would carry two axes into battle. With two axes, one could parry a blow and tangle up the weapon of the attacker, and with the other regain one's attack.

Daggers were carried by just about everyone and were a very last ditch weapon on the battlefield. They were carried in times of peace for personal protection. On the battlefield, they would have very little use, as they were too small to be effective against a kaskara or axe. If used at all, they would be used to finish off a wounded opponent. Daggers were wither single or double edged, and were used for either stabbing or slicing. The type of dagger one carried was really a personal choice.

The Muslims stood in ranks and awaited the Meccan charge with weapons drawn. With no archery barrage from the Meccans, the Muslim army was at full strength when the charge hit. The Meccans were in total disarray when they hit the Muslim lines. They did not hit as a united front, and because of this, the lines of the Muslims were not hit at once. The fighting was brutal for several minutes. After about 10 minutes, the Meccans began to retreat orderly, but a charge from the Muslims sent the Meccan army running haphazardly away from the fight in a total rout. Mohammed brilliant planning had given

the Meccans a way out, and they used it. The Muslims had won the battle of Badr with very few casualties.

The results of this battle were numerous. The Muslims had beaten the Meccan army, a feat which no other army had been capable of. Before the battle, the prophet Mohammed had told his army that God had told him they would win, even though they were outnumbered 10 to 1. His own men believed him, but no one else did. After the battle, people realized that he had been right. This gave his religion credence. People believed that only God could have helped the Muslim army win, and they flocked to Islam. With this influx of new converts, the ranks of the Muslim army swelled, and it enabled them to become a military might in Arabia. The Muslims also regained their property which they had left in Mecca. They soon became an economic powerhouse in Arabia as well.

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