

The Battle of Camel

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Aisha had long hated Ali, and wished that, when the aged Uthman died, her own kinsman, Zubayr, should become caliph. When Uthman was assassinated, she was not in Medina, having gone to Mecca a few weeks previously to perform the pilgrimage. The news of Uthman's murder reached her when she was on the way back. She returned immediately to Mecca and incited the citizens against Ali. The fiery address set a match to the smouldering fire of discontent. The first to respond to Aisha's call was Abdullah bin Amur, the Uthmanid governor of Mecca. Those Umayyads who had fled from Medina after the ghastly murder of Uthman now also joined Aisha, and when Talha and Zubayr came over to Aisha, many more of the Qoraish clamoured to join in the rebellion. Aisha advocated march on Basra. Throwing off the veil ordained, Aisha now took command of the army. The money to equip it came from Yamen treasury, brought to Mecca by the governor whom Ali had deposed. It is however clear from the sources that in the battle between Ali and Aisha, the triumvirate was fighting for personal reason rather than for the blood of Uthman, which was a timely and convenient pretext for them.

Ali had been obliged to abandon the Syrian campaign against Muawiya, deciding instead, to use his small force against Aisha, who had hatched a rebellion. Realizing, however, that his army was by no means adequate for the task in hand, he pitched his camp at Rabaza. In the interim, Aisha occupied Basra in 35/656. Ali was a seasoned commander, born and bred in wars and famous for his skill as tactician. His ascetic life had not chilled his martial fervour and at the advanced age of sixty, he still retained the vigour of a much younger man. He took to war after a recession of 25 years only taught that the demands of duty only should be determined action and inaction, and that in matters concerning principles and duties, the importunities of emotions and claims of age should alike find no place. He was however anxious to avoid the shedding of Muslim blood by Muslims. Of his desire and pacific intention, William Muir writes in "The Caliphate, its Rise, and Fall"(London, 1924, p. 247) that, "But Ali's thoughts were for peace if possible. He was a man of compromise and here he was ready, in the interest of Islam, magnanimously to forget the insult offered him."

The two armies eventually encamped in the Wadi-us-Saba (Valley of the Lion) near the village of Khuraiba outside Basra, facing each other. Aisha, on the advice of some of her followers, went so far as to mount her camel, al-Askar and that this battle is called the Battle of Camel,

which took place on 10th Jamada II, 35/December 4, 656. The battle began and reached a critical stage. Ali ordered his men not to take offensive unless the enemy began to onset. He gave further stringent orders that no wounded should be slain, no fugitive pursued, no plunder seized nor the privacy of any house violated. The showers of arrows were pouring in from the Aisha's side, Ali forbade his soldiers to return the shot and bade them wait. Wherever the camel of Aisha stood, there the battle was waged most fiercely. As long as that animal was standing, Ali realized, would the battle continue. He therefore deputed one of his men to cut off its legs. The warrior slipped behind the camel, did as he was bidden, and the camel thudded to the ground. Within a very short time the bugle sounded the end of the battle. After the battle, Ali repaired to Aisha's camp, where he treated her with greatest deference, "For," said he, "respect must be shown to her because she is the spouse of the holy Prophet." In the care of her brother, and under the command of his own two sons, Ali then sent Aisha to Medina. She was shown every deference and given forty hand-maids. Ali himself accompanied her retinue on foot for a short distance, before bidding her farewell. "It befits your dignity", Ali said to her, "to remain in your house and not to meddle in politics or to share the rough life of the battlefield, nor to join any party in future which may tarnish the glory of your name, or become the authoress of a second rebellion." To this Aisha replied, "By God! there existed no enmity between Ali and me, save a few petty domestic squabbles." On her return to Medina, Aisha led a life of seclusion. She is said to have died in 59/678 at the age of 66 years. The loss in the battle was very great. Some historians say that 16,796 men of Aisha's forces, and 1,070 of Ali's army were killed. During the encounter, the people of Aisha were known as asahab al-jamal (the companions of the camel), but Ali called them an-nakisun (those who broke oath), which is the derivation of Koran (48:10), wherein the word naksa means "bayt" or an oath of allegiance. The supporters of Ali, however, became known after the battle of Camel .(as Shiat'i Ali(the followers of Ali