

## A Critical Study of the Depiction of Hazrat ‘Umar

Talha Ozdemir

Ataturk University

### Abstract

Although there exists a substantial body of research in Arabic, Turkish, and Western literature on the personality and leadership of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, no independent study has focused specifically on his physical characteristics. This study aims to present the most coherent and reliable depiction of ‘Umar’s physical appearance by compiling and comparing the diverse—and at times conflicting—reports found in classical sources. Elements such as his height, weight, hair and beard structure, eyes, skin color, and other bodily features are examined within the framework of these narrations, while exaggerated descriptions and the stylistic conventions of the period are carefully distinguished. The study also discusses disputed attributes in detail, particularly evaluating the differing reports on his complexion and hair characteristics in relation to historical and environmental factors. In light of these findings, the research offers a comprehensive and analytical portrait of ‘Umar’s physical appearance.

**Keywords:** Islamic History, Hazrat ‘Umar, Description, Physical Characteristics.

### Introduction

In the field of Islamic historiography, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb is widely examined due to his political and administrative brilliance, his strong sense of justice, and his significant contributions to the institutionalization of the early Muslim community. Nevertheless, reports concerning his physical characteristics are scattered throughout the literature, and no systematic study has been devoted to analyzing these descriptions. The extensive—and often conflicting—narrations found in classical sources make both the critical evaluation of these reports and their assessment within their historical context necessary. Proceeding from this need, the present study analyzes the key concepts related to ‘Umar’s physical appearance, the variations among the narrations, and the possible reasons behind these differences.

The research first categorizes the reports concerning ‘Umar’s height, weight, hair and beard structure, eye color, skin color, and other bodily attributes. It then evaluates the discrepancies among these narrations by considering the socio-cultural narrative style of the period, climatic conditions, dietary patterns, and the broader historical context. In particular, variations related to skin color—such as those associated with extraordinary circumstances like the Year of Famine—provide meaningful insight into the interpretation of these reports. By conducting a critical reading of the narrations, this study aims to present a coherent depiction of ‘Umar. Thus, it seeks to offer a portrayal of ‘Umar’s physical appearance that is free from exaggeration and constructed within a consistent framework grounded in historical sources.

## 1. Height

Regarding 'Umar's height, the sources transmit different reports that point to the same meaning. These reports may be listed as follows: "Tall = طويل/طوالا" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/323-324; Ṭabarī, 1387, 4/196), "as if he were mounted while people were walking, as though he were one of the men of Banū Sadūs = كأنه راكب والناس يمشون وكأنه من رجال بنو سدوس" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/325; Ibn Qutaybah, 1971, 105; Ṭabarī, 1387, 4/196), "superior to people in height = يَفُوقُ النَّاسَ طُولًا" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/325).

In the sections titled "the tall ones" reported by Ibn Rusta and Ibn Ḥabīb, the name of 'Umar is not mentioned; therefore, we are of the opinion that the emphasis on his extreme tallness in some narrations was intended to portray him as taller and more imposing than he actually was. 'Umar was indeed tall, but the degree of height described in certain reports does not appear physiologically possible for a human being. Such narrations seem to have been expressed in an exaggerated manner either to glorify 'Umar due to his service to Islam, heroism, and bravery, or they reflect metaphorical expressions commonly used in Arab society to denote tall stature.

At this point, one might ask why this attitude—if intended as praise—was not extended to all of his qualities. However, whether concerning 'Umar or other prominent figures, the glorification of a person in relation to one particular attribute requires that the person actually possess that quality to a notable degree. In other words, only an existing trait can be magnified through hyperbole. For this reason, we believe that the descriptions of 'Umar's height should be understood within this framework.

## 2. Weight

Although the sources do not contain reports that directly indicate 'Umar's weight, there are narrations describing him as "large-bodied = جسيما" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/235; Dhahabī, 1985, 2/397; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, 1992, 3/146; Nuwayrī, 1423, 18/150) and "a big/large man = رجلا ضخما" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/235). These expressions implicitly point to his physical weight.

## 3. Hair, Beard, and Moustache

We can state that the reports transmitted regarding these attributes of 'Umar do not present any real contradiction. The narrations concerning his hair are as follows: "Lack of hair on the top of the head / having hair only at the back of the head = أصلع" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/232), "extremely bald = شديد الصلع" (Dhahabī, 1985, 2/397), "extremely bald = أَصْلَعُ شَدِيدَ الصَّلَعِ" (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, 1992, 3/146), "his baldness increased even more = صَلَعُهُ غَمَرُ فَاشْتَدَّ صَلَعُهُ" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/326).

The narrations concerning his hair and beard are as follows: "his beard was yellowish, and he would comb his hair with henna = يُصَوِّرُ لِحْيَتَهُ وَيُرْجِلُ رَأْسَهُ بِالْحِنَّاءِ" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/327; Ibn Kathīr, 1986, 7/138), "having a sparse beard = فِي عَارِضِهِ خَفَةٌ" (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, 1992, 3/146).

As for the narration concerning his moustache, it is stated that: "When 'Umar became angry, he would grasp the ends of his moustache and twist them = غَمَرُ إِذَا غَضِبَ أَخَذَ بِهِدَا، وَأَشَارَ إِلَى سَبَلَتِهِ، فَقَالَ بِهَا إِلَى فَمِهِ" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/326).

Although nearly all narrations concerning 'Umar's hair indicate that he had no hair on the top of his head and that his baldness increased over time, some studies also report that he had reddish hair (Bayraktutan, 2018, 48). When taking these descriptions into consideration, we also encounter narrations stating that 'Umar combed or treated his hair with henna. Based on this,

it seems reasonable to conclude that during the period in which he applied henna to his hair, its color appeared reddish; that in the later stages of his life, although his hair continued to fall out, he still applied henna; and that in the subsequent period his baldness became pronounced.

Another point that we consider complementary regarding his hair and beard is the set of narrations stating that ‘Umar either dyed his hair in old age (applied henna) (Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, 1992, 3/146), did not dye it (did not apply henna), (Ibn Sa‘d, 1968, 3/264; Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, 1992, 3/146) or that “his hair and beard were white = أَشْيَبَ” (Ibn Sa‘d, 1968, 3/323-324). Although these reports do not directly describe a specific physical trait, when evaluated together with the narrations indicating that his baldness had increased considerably, it can be understood that toward the later years of his life, the hair remaining on his head as well as his beard had turned white. The narrations stating that he dyed his hair in old age suggest that at one stage his hair appeared reddish due to the use of henna, whereas the reports indicating that he did not apply henna point to a later period in which his hair became white.

#### 4. Eye

Although we do not encounter differing reports regarding the eye color of ‘Umar, the narrations transmitted about the structure of his eyes make it necessary to discuss this topic under a separate heading. Under this heading, we will limit ourselves to presenting only the narrations related to this attribute. These narrations are as follows: “hazel-eyed = أَشْهَلَ الْعَيْنَيْنِ” (Ibn Sa‘d, 1968, 3/264), “the white part of his eyes was intensely reddish = أَبْيَضَ شَدِيدَ حَمْرَةِ الْعَيْنَيْنِ” (Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, 1992, 3/146), “there was a distinct contrast between the black and white of his eyes = لَخُورَ الْعَيْنَيْنِ” (Ibn Kathīr, 1986, 7/138).

Ibn Ḥabīb’s mention of ‘Umar under the heading “the cross-eyed ones from Quraysh = الْهَوْلَانِ” also provides information about ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb’s eye structure (Ibn Ḥabīb, 1985, 405; Ibn Ḥabīb, 1942, 303). However, we should note that we have not been able to find any additional narration or external source confirming this report.

While there is no disagreement concerning ‘Umar’s eye color, we find it necessary to evaluate the narration claiming that he was cross-eyed. Ibn Ḥabīb is the only scholar who lists ‘Umar under the heading of “the cross-eyed.” We observe that similar classifications in Ibn Ḥabīb’s *al-Muḥabbar* appear almost identically in the works of later authors such as Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276 AH) and Ibn Rusta (d. between 300–326 AH). However, these later authors do not mention ‘Umar under the section titled “the cross-eyed,” which is noteworthy.

#### 5. Nose

Studies conducted on this subject state that ‘Umar had a well-shaped or handsome nose (Bayraktutan, 2018, 49). However, we find it necessary to note that we have not encountered any explicit expression in the primary sources that directly confirms this information.

#### 6. Skin

The narrations transmitted regarding ‘Umar’s skin color differ considerably from one another. This variance has been so significant that it has prevented research works from presenting a clear and reliable depiction of ‘Umar’s complexion. In this section, we will discuss this issue in detail.

The narrations related to this attribute may be listed as follows: “Dark-skinned man = رَجُلٌ أَدَمٌ” (Ibn Sa’d, 1968, 3/264, 323), “white-skinned = أبيض” (Ibn Sa’d, 1968, 3/324), “a white-skinned man whose upper body had a reddish tone = رَجُلٌ أبيضٌ، تَغْلُوهُ حُمْرَةٌ” (Ibn Sa’d, 1968, 3/324), “extremely white skin = أَمَهَقٌ” (Ibn Sa’d, 1968, 3/324),<sup>1</sup> “extremely dark-skinned = أَدَمٌ شَدِيدُ الْأَدَمَةِ” (Ṭabarī, 1387, 4/196), “extremely fair-skinned, with a reddish upper body = كَانَ أَبْيَضَ شَدِيدَ الْبَيَاضِ تَغْلُوهُ حُمْرَةٌ” (Ibn Kathīr, 1986, 7/138).

The conflicting narrations concerning ‘Umar’s skin color appear to have influenced modern research as well. In this regard, we are of the opinion that citing only one of these reports and disregarding the others would not lead to an accurate understanding of ‘Umar. At the same time, it must be emphasized that all of these narrations should be taken into consideration when attempting to construct a comprehensive depiction of him.

We believe that the conflicting narrations regarding ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb’s skin color can be reconciled by taking into account the period in which he lived, the conditions he experienced, and factors such as climate and diet. It is well known and frequently attested that an individual’s physical characteristics - including skin tone - are affected by climate, living conditions, and nutritional habits. The Hijaz region is characterized by intense heat and aridity, and its inhabitants often sought any available shade to protect themselves from the sun. Among the cities of this region, Mecca and Medina are known for their extreme heat, occasional winds, and limited water wells. ‘Umar spent the majority of his life in this environment and, during his caliphate, also contended with the Year of Famine.

The foods ‘Umar consumed during the famine were markedly different from those he consumed under normal circumstances. Moreover, the weather during that year was particularly hot and dry. Therefore, reports describing ‘Umar during the Year of Famine must be evaluated within this context when constructing his physical depiction.

Ibn Sa’d provides extensive information regarding the Year of Famine (*‘Ām al-Ramādah*). During this year, a dish prepared with clarified fat was brought to ‘Umar. ‘Umar invited a Bedouin to join him, and they began to eat together. When the Bedouin started scraping the remaining fat from the edge of the dish with his bread, the Caliph remarked, “It seems as though you are in need of the fat of meat.” The Bedouin replied, “You are right. From such-and-such a time until now, I have neither eaten clarified butter or olive oil nor seen anyone who has eaten them.” Upon hearing this, it is reported that ‘Umar swore that he would not eat meat or clarified butter until people returned to their former living conditions. Indeed, it is narrated that he refrained from consuming either meat or clarified butter until the people regained their previous standard of life (Ibn Sa’d, 1968, 3/312-313). During this year, it is also reported that ‘Umar, like his subjects, consumed olive oil (Ibn Sa’d, 1968, 3/313).

As is evident, ‘Umar -like other people- was unable to consume the foods he had eaten previously, and he experienced difficult days during this period of famine and drought. It is

<sup>1</sup> In the relevant narration, the term “أَمَهَقٌ” is rendered in some modern dictionaries as “albino.” This suggests either that ‘Umar possessed a degree of fairness approaching a pathological level, or that the term was used within that society to denote an unusually pronounced whiteness of complexion. However, the appearance of the word “أَمَهَقٌ” alongside the expression “بَيَاضٌ” in the sources indicates that ‘Umar’s skin exhibited a level of whiteness that was far from ordinary. In this context, we found it necessary to offer a brief explanation to clarify the meaning we have assigned to the term. This is because classical dictionaries indicate that the word denotes a complexion resembling chalk - free from any redness or darkness. See. (Ibn Manẓūr, 1414, 10/349).

reported that, due to what he consumed during the famine years, 'Umar's complexion faded and became darker (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/313-324). In some narrations, it is stated that there was disagreement regarding 'Umar's complexion, as certain individuals from the Hijaz described him as extremely fair-skinned, whereas Kufans depicted him as very dark-skinned (Ibn Qutaybah, 1971, 105). This situation indicates that the variations concerning 'Umar's skin color are multidimensional and require careful analysis to be properly understood.

'Iyād b. Khalīfah stated: "I saw 'Umar during the Year of Famine, and his complexion was dark. Yet before that, he had been fair-skinned. He was an Arab who ate meat and fat and drank milk. However, during the famine, he declared these two foods forbidden for himself and consumed only olive oil. As a result, his skin color changed (and became darker)" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/323). It is reported that while 'Umar would eat bread soaked in milk and fat during times of abundance, in this nine-month period of famine he ate bread dipped in vinegar and olive oil. As a result, his complexion darkened, he became extremely thin, and people even feared that he might fall ill due to his severe weight loss (Ibn Kathīr, 1986, 7/90).

It is also reported that al-Wāqidī claimed that those who described 'Umar as dark-skinned had seen him during the Year of Famine. However, there are also narrations stating that al-Wāqidī's assertion - that 'Umar's complexion darkened because he consumed olive oil during the famine - is not acceptable, and that the correct view is that 'Umar's natural complexion was already very dark, independent of what he ate during that year (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, 1992, 3/146).

As seen above, the sources present various descriptions of 'Umar's complexion - ranging from chalk-white, reddish-tinged, dark-skinned, to very dark-skinned - alongside reports indicating that his skin darkened due to the foods he consumed during the Year of Famine. In light of these narrations, we hold the view that an evaluation of 'Umar's complexion must take into account the region in which he lived and the types of food he consumed. Based on this assumption, it seems reasonable to conclude that 'Umar originally had a very light complexion, which at times appeared reddish due to the effects of a hot climate, and that prolonged exposure to extreme heat and arid conditions, coupled with the limited and harsh diet he consumed for an extended period, caused his skin to fade and darken to the extent that it could be described as brown. Furthermore, it should be noted that during this year - marked by severe heat and drought - 'Umar actively sought solutions to alleviate the effects of the famine (Öner, 127-130, 133-135; Akgün – Öztürk, 2018, 338-339).

## 7. Teeth

In the sources, we were able to identify only a single narration regarding 'Umar's dental structure. This narration states: "his teeth were beautiful and white = أَشْنَبَ الْأَسْنَانُ" (Ibn Kathīr, 1986, 7/138). This report serves as a complementary detail concerning 'Umar's overall physical attributes.

## 8. Body

### 8.1. Shoulders and Muscular Build

The sources report that 'Umar was "left-handed and strong = أَعْسَرَ يَسْرًا" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/323-324). In addition, as mentioned in the section on his height, he was a large-built man and is described as having "broad shoulders = بَعِيدَ مَا بَيْنَ الْمَنْكِبَيْنِ" (Ibn Sa'd, 1968, 3/264) 'Umar's reputation for being an excellent horseman and a skilled wrestler also gains significance in this context, supporting the depiction of him as someone with an athletic build. Although all of

these qualities demonstrate that ‘Umar was imposing and strong, we should note that they do not necessarily point to an excessively muscular physique.

### 8.2.Hairiness

Although we could not find many narrations regarding the hairiness of ‘Umar’s body, the report we have identified provides meaningful information. This narration states: “His limbs were very hairy = كثيرة الشعر في أطرافها صهبة” (Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, 1992, 3/146). From the term “صهبة” in the report, we understand that the hair on ‘Umar’s body was reddish in color.

### 8.3.Hands and Feet

It is reported that ‘Umar’s hands and feet were large. Regarding the structure of his feet, the following descriptions are transmitted: “His feet were arched = رَجُلَيْهِ رَوْحٌ” (Ibn Sa‘d, 1968, 3/325), “his heels were close to each other while the tips of his feet were distant = كان أرواح” (Ibn Qutaybah, 1971, 105).

## Conclusion

This study has aimed to construct a coherent and comprehensive portrait of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb’s physical characteristics by systematically examining the dispersed—and often mutually contradictory—reports found in classical Islamic sources. Although there exists a substantial body of literature on ‘Umar, the absence of an independent study focusing specifically on his physical appearance makes this research distinctive. By reconsidering the diversity of reports in light of Arabic descriptive conventions, historical context, extraordinary circumstances such as the Year of Famine, and differing societal perceptions, this study has clarified the background behind the apparent discrepancies in the transmitted accounts. In this respect, the work fills a significant gap in the scholarship, which has traditionally prioritized ‘Umar’s political, social, and administrative qualities.

The findings demonstrate that the transmitted reports concerning ‘Umar’s physical attributes cannot be reduced to a single uniform depiction; narrations regarding his complexion, hair and beard, and eyes display considerable variation. The study highlights that factors such as living conditions, diet, and climatic environment—particularly evident in the case of the famine year—may have contributed to differences in his physical portrayal. These discrepancies were analyzed through a critical methodological approach, and a reasonable and coherent depiction was constructed by evaluating all relevant reports collectively.

In this regard, the present research constitutes the first comprehensive academic study devoted specifically to the physical description of ‘Umar. By gathering the narrations in their entirety and reinterpreting conflicting accounts within their historical contexts, it offers an original contribution to the field. The study is also significant for developing an approach that filters out embellished elements in the narratives and grounds the analysis in the living conditions and realities of the period.

In conclusion, through a critical, source-based reading, this research presents a detailed and consistent framework for understanding the physical appearance of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, thereby establishing a new point of reference for future biographical studies. Thus, the study is not only a biographical inquiry but also a methodological model demonstrating the importance of contextual reading in evaluating classical reports. It provides a foundational basis for subsequent research concerning the portrayal of ‘Umar.

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