

Khalifa Umar bin al-Khattab - Pre-Islamic Period

Hadart Umar In The Days Of Ignorance

No account is preserved about the early life of Umar during the days of ignorance. Umar belonged to an ordinary family of average means and there was nothing conspicuous about Umar or his family during the days of ignorance to be recorded or chronicled. We can merely pick up stray accounts here and there, and try to weave them into a readable narrative.

It appears that Umar grew up as a typical Arab—a tall young man with a fine physique and impressive personality. When he was a child his father put him to the task of grazing camels. Khattab was a hard taskmaster, and Umar often recalled how his father belaboured him mercilessly whenever there was a lapse on his part. Umar also recalled that when he was a child he used to graze the flocks of goats and sheep of his maternal aunts who doled out pittance to him in the shape of dates.

As a child, Umar used to graze the animals under his charge in the grazing ground Dajnan, about ten miles from Mecca. When Umar became the Khalifa, he happened to pass through Dajnan. Turning to his companions he said:

"Gracious heavens! There was a time when I used to roam about this desert as a camel-herd, wearing a felt jacket, and whenever I sat down tired my father beat me. Now the times have changed. There is now none save God as my superior."

Among the Quraish of those days, reading and writing was not in vogue. In spite of that Umar received education in reading and writing. It is related that among the Quraish of Mecca only seventeen persons could read and write, and Umar was one of them. That has to be acknowledged as a great attainment.

Umar's father was an authority in tracing genealogies. Under the guidance of his father, Umar also acquired matchless skill in the matter of the study of pedigrees.

Umar knew intimately as to who was who among the Quraish. He was also well versed in the knowledge of the history of Arabia.

Umar was blessed with a strong physique. He could undergo great rigours. He could travel on foot for miles. He was an athlete and a wrestler. He participated in the wrestling matches on the occasion of the annual fair at Ukaz, and he won in most of such matches. From the accounts that have come down to us it appears that Umar had attained perfection in the art of wrestling.

Some first hand descriptions of the physical appearance of Umar have come down to us. Ibn Saad and al-Hakim have recorded a description of Umar as Abu Miriam Zir, a native of Kufa described him. Zir said:

"I went forth with the people of Madina on a festival day, and I saw Umar walking barefoot. He was advanced in years, bald, of a tawny colour—a left handed man, tall, and towering above the people."

Ibn Umar described the physical appearance of Umar as follows:

"He was a man of fair complexion, a ruddy tint prevailing, tall, bald and grey."

Ubayd bin Umayr described Umar as follows:

"Umar used to overtop the people in height."

Salima bin al-Akwa'a said about him:

" Umar was ambidexter; he could use both his hands equally well."

Ibn Asakir records on the authority of Abu Raja al-U'taridi that:

"Umar was a man tall, stout, very bald, very ruddy with scanty hair on the cheeks, his moustaches large, and the ends thereof reddish."

Umar was a skillful rider. He could successfully manage even the wildest of horses he would literally jump on the back of the horse, and sit with such ease and steadiness that he appeared to be a part and parcel of the horse he rode.

He was very intelligent and shrewd. He was a good public speaker. He was gifted with an uncommon degree of tact and judgment, and on several occasions he successfully undertook ambassadorial missions on behalf of the Quraish.

By all accounts he was self-respecting, broad-minded and sincere. He was a man of strong convictions, a good friend, and a bad enemy. Like the rugged hills around him, he was harsh and stern, violent in temper, but very good of heart. He was always prepared to stand up against the oppressor and espouse the cause of the weak.

He followed the profession of a trader. He undertook journeys to Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere for the purposes of trade. He was a successful trader, and he made good money as a result of these commercial journeys. When Umar migrated from Mecca, according to his own account, he was one of the richest Quraish merchants.

In his books, Akhbar-ul-Zaman, and Kitab-ul-Ausat the celebrated historian Masudi is understood to have related the incidents of the travels of Umar. Masudi states that Umar paid visits to several Arabian and Persian princes. These books of Masudi have, however, been lost, and the details of these journeys are no longer available to us.

Before his conversion to Islam, Umar had three wives. His first wife was Qariba bint Abi Umayya al-Makhzumi. She belonged to the same clan as the mother of Umar. She was one of the most beautiful women of Mecca of the day. His second wife was Zainab bint Maziun. She was the sister of Usman bint Maz'un an early companion for whom the Holy Prophet had great regard. She was the mother of Abdullah and Hafsa. His third wife was Malaika bint Jarul al-Khuzai. She was also called Umm Kulsum.

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