



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Ali ibn Abi Talib”

Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopaedia

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‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (599-661 CE) was the first cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad; the fourth of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs (*al-khulafa’ al-rashidun*); and the first of the Imams deemed by all Shi‘i Muslims to be appointed by divine mandate. The word *Shi‘i* itself is derived from the term *shi‘at* ‘Ali, which means “partisans of ‘Ali.”

Few figures of nascent Islam had as pervasive and enduring an influence—both symbolic and actual—on the unfolding of Islamic thought, culture, and spirituality as Imam ‘Ali. Referred to by the Prophet as the “gate” to the city of prophetic science, one of the most noticeable features of his legacy for medieval Islam is indeed the range of disciplines - from theology and exegesis to calligraphy and numerology, from law and mysticism to grammar and rhetoric that are regarded as having been foreshadowed by Imam ‘Ali.

As Companion of the Prophet

Imam ‘Ali was about five years old when he was taken into the household of the Prophet Muhammad and, from this time until the death of the Prophet, was his constant companion. He was one of the first to confirm the mission of the Prophet, although he was still but a youth. After the migration (*al-hijra*) to Medina (622 CE), Imam ‘Ali distinguished himself principally as the most outstanding warrior in the early battles fought by the Muslims, his valor and strength assuming legendary dimensions through the reports of the battle of Khaybar in 629 CE. He was also one of the scribes of the verses of the then continuing revelation of the Qur’an.

In Medina, the Prophet instituted a pact of brotherhood between the emigrants from Mecca and the “helpers” (the Muslims of Medina), and he adopted Imam ‘Ali as his brother. The Prophet married Imam ‘Ali to his daughter, Fatima, who was considered (along with her mother, Prophet Muhammad’s first wife, Khadija) to be a paragon of feminine sanctity in Islam. The Prophet’s *ahl al-bayt* (“people of the House”) - the members of which the Qur’an refers to in verse 33:33 as being purified of all defilement - was indicated by the Prophet as consisting of himself, ‘Ali, Fatima, and their two sons, Hasan and Husayn.

In one of the most famous and much-debated sayings of the Prophet, known as the Hadith al-Ghadir, Imam ‘Ali is referred to as the *mawla* (guide/master/nearest) of all those who regard the Prophet as their *mawla*. For Shi‘is, this implied a clear designation (*nass*) by the Prophet of Imam ‘Ali as his successor. It was belief in Imam ‘Ali as the true, divinely appointed successor (*khalifa*) and heir (*wasi*) of the Prophet that formed the theological basis of the distinctive political philosophy of Shi‘ism. Such Shi‘ite dynasties as the (Isma‘ili) Fatimids (q.v.) and the (Ithna‘ashari) Safawids (q.v.) were founded on this political philosophy.

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As Caliph

The short caliphate of 'Ali (656-661 CE) was marked principally by the first civil wars within Islam. He fought three major battles: that of Jamal (656 CE) against the forces of Talha, Zubayr (two leading companions), and 'A'isha (one of the Prophet's wives); that of Siffin against Mu'awiya (657 CE); and that of Nahrawan (658 CE) against the "Seceders" (Kharijites [q.v.]; those who seceded from his own ranks). Although victorious in the first and last of these battles, the second resulted in a stalemate and an attempt at arbitration. When this attempt collapsed, Imam 'Ali roused his forces for a resumption of the war against Mu'awiya but was attacked by a Kharijite during morning prayers at the congregational mosque in Kufa on 28 January 661 CE; he died from his wounds two days later.

Intellectual and Spiritual Legacy

The chief vehicle of Imam 'Ali's intellectual legacy is the *Nahj al-Balagha*, a text of sermons, letters, and aphorisms that was compiled by al-Sharif al-Radi (d. 1016 CE), a renowned Shi'i scholar of 'Abbasid Baghdad. Few texts have exerted a greater influence on the field of Arabic literature and rhetoric than the *Nahj*. Despite ongoing questions about the authenticity of the text, recent scholarship suggests that most of the material in it can in fact be attributed to Imam 'Ali (Djebli, 56). The numerous commentaries on this text - the most important being that of the Mu'tazilite, Ibn Abi l-Hadid (d. 655 CE) - greatly amplified its influence on theological speculation, philosophical thought, and literary discourse.

With regard to Imam 'Ali's spiritual legacy, this was transmitted in the Sunni world principally through the widespread Sufi brotherhoods (turuq, sing. tariqa, q.v.), all of which trace their spiritual genealogy back to him through an unbroken chain of initiatic masters. In the Shi'i context, his spiritual influence is discerned in the tradition of what came to be called *'irfan* (*gnosis*; q.v.), which partly overlaps with Sufism but is distinct from it in certain respects.

Imam 'Ali's shrine in Najaf, near Baghdad, remains one of the most important places of pilgrimage in the Muslim world.

Further Reading

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al-Tabari, Abu Ja‘far Muhammad ibn Jarir. *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. Adrian Brockett. New York: 7. See in particular vol. XVI, “The Community Divided - The Caliphate of ‘Ali I, A.D. 656-657/ A.H. 35-36” and vol. XVII, “The First Civil War - From the Battle of Siffin to the Death of ‘Ali, A.D. 656-661/ A.H. 36-40.”