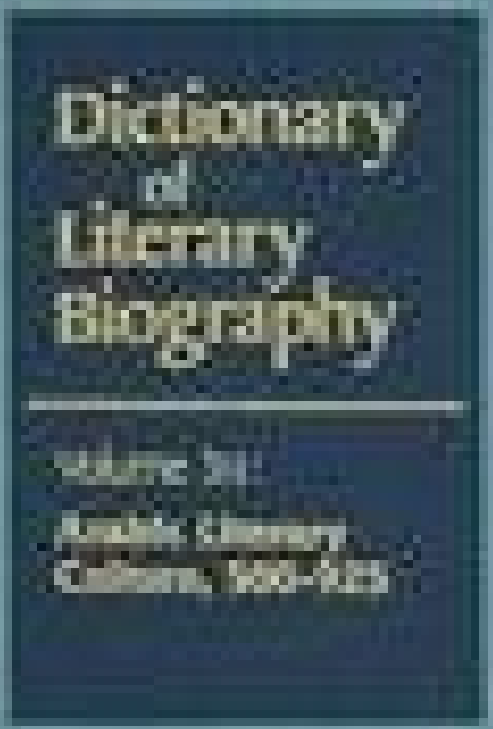

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Arabic Literary Culture, 500–925

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ʻAli ibn Abi Talib

(circa 600 – 661)

B. Tahera Qutbuddin
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'Ali ibn Abi Talib was the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. Shia Muslims believe him to be the successor of the Prophet and thus the first Imam (divinely appointed leader) of the Muslim community. Sunni Muslims consider him the last of the "Rightly Guided Caliphs," the first four successors to the Prophet's position as political head of the community. All Muslims honor his name and revere his words. His eloquence has become proverbial, such that he is considered the exemplar par excellence for those who would follow the Arabic *nahj al-balaghah* (path of eloquence). *Nahj al-balaghah* is the title given to the best-known compilation of his words, a collection that includes some of his most resonant orations, sermons, epistles, testaments, and words of wisdom.

'Ali was born in Mecca, according to some reports inside the walls of the Holy Ka'bah (the shrine reportedly built by Abraham), around the year 600. His mother was Fatima bint Asad ibn Hashim, and his father was Abu Talib ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim, a prominent member of the noble tribe of Quraysh and chief of one of its most powerful clans, the Banu Hashim. Abu Talib had brought up his nephew Muhammad after the death of the latter's father and grandfather. This consideration may have been among those that prompted the young Muhammad to request guardianship of his uncle's newborn son, and 'Ali grew up in the care of his cousin, the future Prophet of Islam.

'Ali was a child of around seven when Muhammad began his call to Islam. According to the majority of medieval historians, 'Ali was the first male–and the second person after Muhammad's wife Khadija–to accept Islam. He immigrated to Medina several days after Muhammad, having discharged the latter's debts and trusts in Mecca. In Medina he participated actively in setting up the new religion and state. He played the leading role in the early Islamic confrontations with the Meccans, including the major battles of Badr, Uhud, al-Khandaq, and Khaybar. 'Ali's record in combat was a key factor in establishing him as the invincible hero of Islam, a role exemplified by the Shiite rallying cry "There is no champion other than 'Ali, no sword but the Dhu al-Faqar"–literally, "the Vertebrate One," the name given to 'Ali's sword, probably because of the pattern of regular indentations down the spine of its blade. 'Ali also officiated as one of the Prophet's scribes, writing down verses of the Qur'an as they were revealed. The Treaty of al-Hudaybiyah, an agreement concluded between the Muslims and the pagan Meccans in 628, is also ascribed to his pen.

'Ali's close relationship with Muhammad is illustrated in several historical vignettes. On the night before Muhammad's emigration, when the Meccans had reportedly planned to kill him in his bed, 'Ali is said to have slept there as a decoy, risking his own life to do so. After moving to Medina, when Muhammad paired off each Muslim immigrant with a Medinan helper as a "brother," Muhammad is said to have paired 'Ali with himself. During the battle of Uhud, when the majority of the Muslims pursued the retreating Meccans and left Muhammad alone under attack, 'Ali is said to have stayed with him and defended him valiantly.

'Ali married the youngest daughter of the Prophet, Fatima, and had four children by her: al-Hasan (the first Shiite Imam after 'Ali), al-Husayn (the second Shiite Imam and the martyr of Kerbala), Zaynab, and Umm Kulthum. After Fatima's death he married again. He had, according to some sources, ten sons and fifteen daughters. They played a vital role in the religious and political life of the early Islamic era. Many of them, especially al-Husayn and Zaynab, were renowned for their oratorical skills as well.

When Muhammad died in 632, the majority of the Muslims swore allegiance to Abu Bakr as caliph. According to the Shia, Muhammad had designated 'Ali as his successor, having been commanded to do so by God; the caliphate, they believed, was wrongfully seized from him by Abu Bakr. Medieval sources concur that 'Ali was vocal about his greater right to the succession and accepted Abu Bakr's caliphate only under duress. During the twenty-five years of the caliphates of Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman, 'Ali did not play a significant part in the administration of the Muslim community. He spent his time educating his sons al-Hasan and al-Husayn and collecting the Qur'an, according to sources such as the *Kitab al-masahif* (929, The Book of Qur'an Collections) of Ibn Abi Da'ud and al-Ya'qubi's *Ta'rikh* (897, History). He is credited with transmitting some Hadith (authenticated statements of the Prophet). He is also said to have composed a legendary work revealing knowledge of all things past and to come, titled *Kitab al-'ilm* (The Book of Knowledge) and entrusted to al-Hasan and al-Husayn. Meanwhile, the third caliph, 'Uthman, had incurred the displeasure of many of his subjects, chiefly because of his open favoritism toward his clan, the Banu Umayyah, and his granting of lucrative governorships to them. He was slain by a group of Muslims from Egypt and Medina in 656. Soon thereafter, allegiance was pledged by the Muslims to 'Ali as the next caliph.

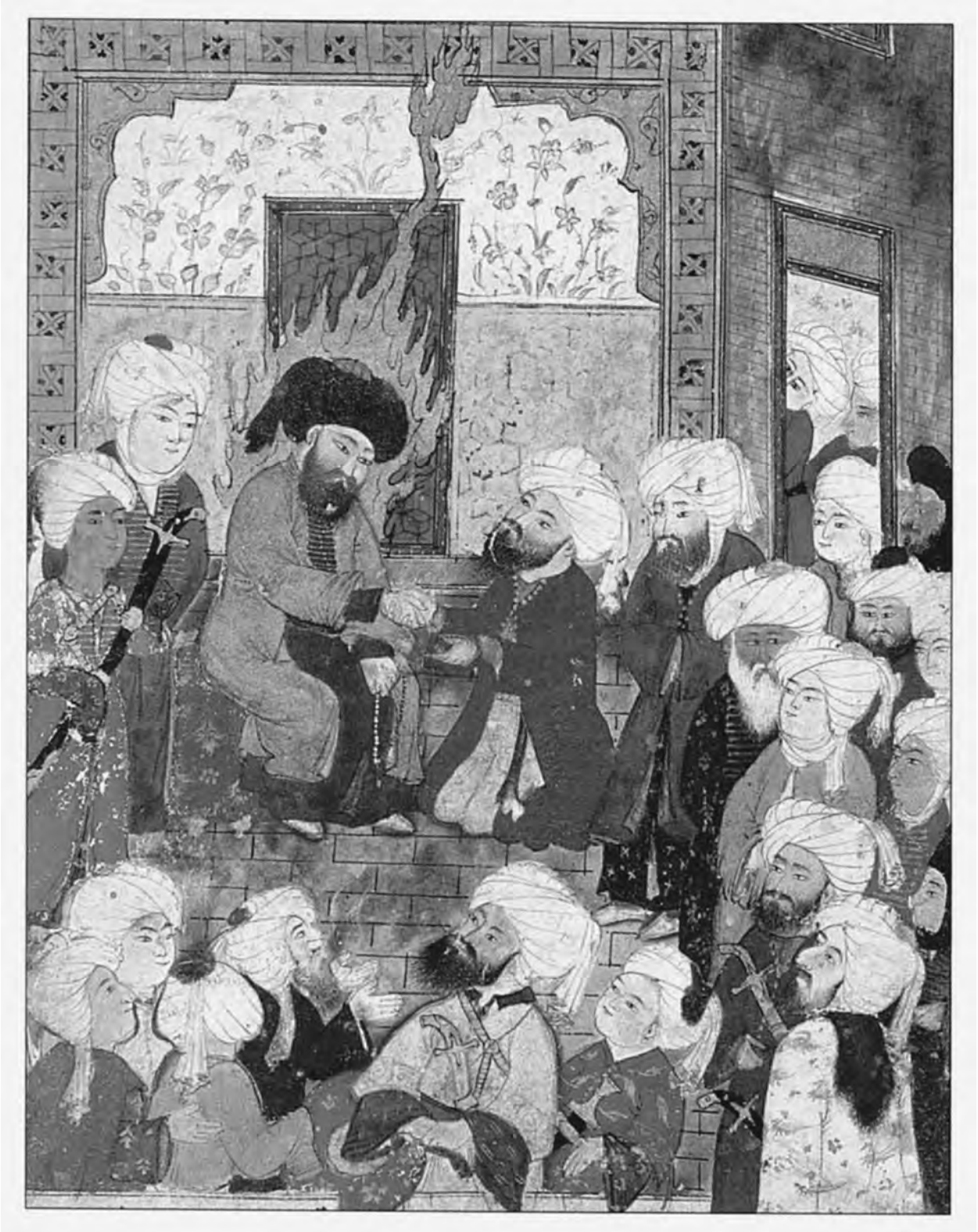


Sixteenth-century Indian painting depicting a child ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib slaying a dragon. The halo of flames around him illustrates his status as a Muslim saint (Museum of Ethnology, Rotterdam; from Paul Faber and others, eds., Dreaming of Paradise: Islamic Art from the Collection of the Museum of Ethnology, Rotterdam *[Rotterdam: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, 1993]; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina).*

Thus began the four-year term of ‘Ali’s rule as caliph. Short but intense, this period was extremely productive from a literary point of view. Most of his orations, epistles, and testaments, and some verses of possibly authentic poetry, are recorded from this period of continuous combat.

One of the first things ‘Ali did upon his accession to the caliphate was to set about replacing ‘Uthman’s governors. The governor of Syria was Mu‘awiyah, one of ‘Uthman’s clan. He refused to step down and, after garnering the support of the people of Syria, declared ‘Ali’s caliphate illegitimate. ‘Ali began putting together forces to oust Mu‘awiyah from Syria. Meanwhile, sedition was brewing closer to home. ‘A’ishah, one of the widows of the Prophet and the daughter of Abu Bakr, considered ‘Ali a personal enemy. She had not liked ‘Uthman either and indeed had instigated the people against him before leaving Medina for Mecca just prior to his death. When she heard of ‘Ali’s succession, however, she used the fact that ‘Uthman’s murderers were among ‘Ali’s supporters to incite against him Muslims who had come for the pilgrimage to Mecca. She teamed up with Talhah and al-Zubayr, two important personages in early Islam who had their own grievances against ‘Ali. The allies set course for Basra, one of the two garrison towns of Iraq, threw out ‘Ali’s governor, and recruited a large number of its inhabitants to fight against ‘Ali. ‘Ali had perforce to divert his attention from Syria to Iraq. His troops consisted of the people of Medina and the people of the other big garrison town of Iraq, Kufa (which later became his capital). The two armies met. Persuasion failed, and a bloody battle was fought outside Basra. This contest has become famous as the Battle of the Camel, deriving its name from the camel ridden by ‘A’ishah onto the battlefield. ‘Ali was victorious; Talhah and al-Zubayr were killed; and ‘A’ishah was sent back in disgrace to Medina.

After recouping his forces, ‘Ali set off for Syria to fight Mu‘awiyah. Mu‘awiyah fired up the Syrians using the same pretext earlier employed by ‘A’ishah: revenge for the blood of ‘Uthman. He set out with his forces to meet ‘Ali. The two armies met on the plains of Siffin. The battle dragged on for ten days, and the last day of bloody fighting continued into the night. Thousands were killed. Reports have it that blood flowed so copiously that it came up to the knees of the warriors’ horses. ‘Ali himself took part in the battle. He challenged Mu‘awiyah to single combat several times. Mu‘awiyah, being well aware of ‘Ali’s reputation as an intrepid warrior, refused. The battle was slowly but surely turning in ‘Ali’s favor when Mu‘awiyah resorted to a ruse. He reportedly had his army raise copies of the Qur’an on spears. This sign was supposed to show that the Book of God, rather than the sword, should decide who was in the right. ‘Ali’s army, despite their advantage, and despite ‘Ali’s urging the contrary, stopped fighting. The two sides agreed upon arbitration. Mu‘awiyah nominated the proverbially cunning ‘Amr ibn al-‘As as his representative. ‘Ali was inexplicably compelled by his own people to accept as his nominee Abu Musa al-Ash‘ari, the very man who had tried to stop the people of Kufa from joining ‘Ali’s forces in the Battle of the Camel. The armies dispersed after agreeing upon a meeting time and place for the two arbitrators. When the two met to arbitrate after several months, ‘Amr tricked Abu Musa into declaring ‘Ali’s claims invalid, and then promptly claimed the caliphate for Mu‘awiyah. The Syrians rejoiced.



Muslims swearing allegiance to 'Ali, who became the fourth and final "Rightly Guided Caliph" in 656 (Collection of Michael Holford, Loughton, Essex; from Denise Dersin, ed., What Life Was Like in the Lands of the Prophet: Islamic World, A.D. 579–1405 *[Richmond: Time-Life, 1999]; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)*

‘Ali’s supporters in Iraq and in the rest of the Islamic empire were thrown into confusion. Some continued to support ‘Ali. Some forsook all political involvement. A third group, consisting of 4,000 men, decided to repudiate both ‘Ali and Mu‘awiyah and “reclaim the caliphate for the Muslim community.” These men were the so-called Kharijites, “abandoners (of religion).” They considered any Muslim who did not accept their principles an unbeliever and liable to be slain. With the war cry “No power to any save God,” they proceeded to pillage and kill. ‘Ali sent envoys to persuade them to rejoin his followers, but they refused. He met them in the Battle of Nahrawan. Some he persuaded to return to his side. Others abandoned the confrontation. Approximately 1,500 men remained. ‘Ali’s army killed all but a few, who survived to propagate their beliefs. The Kharijites exist to the present day in small pockets in North Africa and Oman.

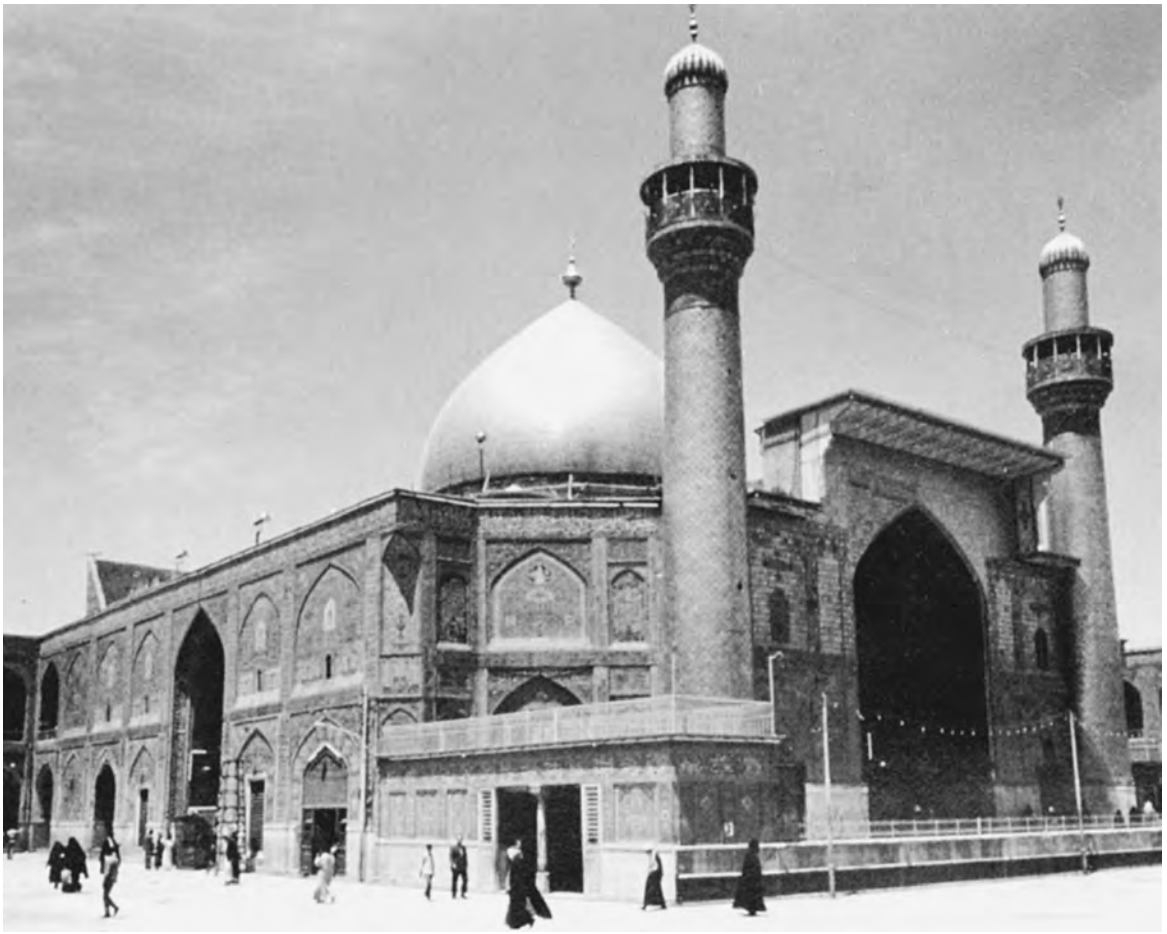
Mu‘awiyah, in the meantime, realizing that an all-out battle might not be to his advantage, began sending raiding expeditions to despoil the lands controlled by ‘Ali: the Hijaz, Egypt, and Iraq itself. ‘Ali’s supporters were tired of fighting and confused, and Mu‘awiyah slowly began gaining the upper hand. ‘Ali continued to try to revive his own supporters through his oratory. The orations he delivered in this period are some of the most poignant in Arabic literature.

Such was the chaotic state of affairs when ‘Ali was struck a deathblow by the poisoned sword of the Kharijite ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljam al-Muradi as he was praying in the Kufa mosque at dawn in January 661. He is reported to have uttered the words “By the Lord of the Ka‘bah, I have triumphed!” as he was struck down. He died two days later. He was buried in the outskirts of Kufa, the site of present-day Najaf, which has since become a major city, with Kufa its satellite suburb. ‘Ali’s shrine is an important pilgrimage site for Shiite Muslims.

Although the historical events of ‘Ali’s life are portrayed in a similar fashion by most historians, he is perceived differently by various denominations of Muslims. In Sunni doctrine, ‘Ali is considered a pious and austere man, a close companion of the Prophet, and the fourth caliph of Islam. His knowledge of Islamic doctrine and law, his love for Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, and his heroic role in the early battles of the Muslims are all applauded. In Sufi belief, ‘Ali is considered one of the earliest spiritual masters, often regarded as the first link after the Prophet in the Sufi *silsilah* (chain). His ethical and doctrinal statements are quoted regularly in Sufi manuals. In Shiite doctrine, ‘Ali is believed to be the spiritual and temporal successor of the Prophet, having been publicly appointed by him at a place called Ghadir Khumm some months prior to the Prophet’s death. In this capacity, ‘Ali is held to be the infallible Imam, divinely guided and able to perform miracles. His progeny are believed to inherit this role, and allegiance to them is considered necessary for salvation. In this vein, the Shia say, is the Prophetic Hadith: “It is the *shi‘ah* (followers) of ‘Ali who will be triumphant.” The Shia have branched out into several sects based on the line of succession they accept as legitimate. The majority are the Twelver Shiites in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Other Shiite groups are the Isma‘ilis and Zaydis. There are also some branches of Shiites, such as the Nusayri denomination, who believe in the divinity of ‘Ali. Such groups are often called *ghulat* (exaggerator) Shiites.

‘Ali is known by several titles in the literary and historical sources. Two of these are “lion” epithets that have to do with strength and courage, probably stemming from ‘Ali’s proverbial prowess in battle. Thus, he is called “Asad Allah” or “Sher-e Khuda”–God’s lion–and “Haydar” or “Haydara,” the name given to a lion that is among lions like a king among men, because of the thickness of its neck and the strength of its forelegs. Sometimes, attached to the “Haydar” is the adjective *safdar* (valiant commander) or *karrar,* one who keeps returning to fight like a charging horse. Further, ‘Ali is petitioned by those who consider him a refuge as “Mushkil kusha,” one who solves difficulties. In the early historical sources he is often called by his agnomen “Abu al-Hasan.” Other titles used mostly by the Shia are connected with ‘Ali’s exalted spiritual position. He is called “al-Murtada,” one with whom God is well pleased, or the chosen one, and “Saqi-ye Kawthar,” the one who allows his followers to drink from the paradisaical pool of Kawthar. He is often referred to by the pseudo-agnomen “Abu Turab” (Father of Dust), interpreted by the Shia to mean father of the believers. He is also known as “al-Wasi” (The Prophet’s Legatee), or, along similar lines, as “Amir al-mu’minin” (Commander of the Believers), a title given to him, according to the Shia, by Muhammad, and the most commonly used of his titles in Shia circles.

‘Ali is the subject of an extensive body of Shiite literature, and he figures prominently in a large number of panegyrics and dirges composed through the centuries. Several Shia poets are known mainly for their poems in praise of ‘Ali. Many of these poems, in addition to the religious sentiments expressed in them, are politically oriented, and they often aroused the ire of the Sunni rulers. In the eighth century, Kumayt b. Zayd al-Asadi, a Zaydi Shiite, composed a cycle of eleven odes known as the *Hashimiyyat* in praise of ‘Ali, his son al-Husayn, and the Banu Hashim. His near contemporary, al-Sayyid al-Himyari, an Iraqi born of Kharijite parents who became Shiite and eventually recognized



'Ali's burial shrine in Najaf in southern Iraq. The shrine is an important pilgrimage site for Shiite Muslims, who believe 'Ali to be the first imam (divinely appointed leader) of the Muslim community (photograph by Christine Osborne Pictures; from Albert Hourani, A History of the Arab Peoples *(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991]; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina).*

the imamate of Ja'far al-Sadiq, grew to be famous as a Shiite poet praising 'Ali, al-Husayn, and the *ahl al-bayt* (family of the Prophet). In the tenth and eleventh centuries, al-Sharif al-Radi, the compiler of the *Nahj al-balaghah,* praised 'Ali extensively in his poetry. In the thirteenth century Ibn Abi al-Hadid (famous for his commentary on the *Nahj al-balaghah*), a Mu'tazilite with strong Shiite leanings, composed seven odes in praise of 'Ali known as *al-Qasa'id al-Sab' al-'Alawiyyat* (1256 or 1257; The Seven Odes on 'Ali).

Shiite biographies of 'Ali include the works of the medieval Fatimid scholar al-Qadi al-Nu'man, the Twelver Shiite scholars Ibn Babawayhi, al-Tabarsi, al-Mufid, and al-Tusi, and the late-medieval Ismaili-Tayyibi da'i Hatim b. Ibrahim al-Hamidi. Moreover, there are several medieval Sunni works devoted solely to 'Ali's merits, such as those by al-Nasa'i, Ibn al-Maghazili al-Iskafi, and Sibt Ibn al-Jawzi. In the twentieth century, Shiite scholars such as al-Majlisi and al-Amini produced detailed multivolume compilations from the medieval sources about various aspects of 'Ali's life, including his rightful succession to the Prophet and miracles attributed to him.

'Ali is a familiar figure in medieval Islamic historical literature. Chronicles such as those by al-Tabari, al-Mas'udi, Ibn Qutayba, al-Dinawari, and al-Ya'qubi refer to him frequently in their accounts of the Prophet's mission, the caliphates of Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthman, and his own caliphate. Biographical works, such as those by Abu Nu'aym, Ibn Sa'd, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, Ibn Hajar, and al-Suyuti, usually include an entry on 'Ali. These entries are subdivided into sections dealing with such subjects as his acceptance of Islam; his merits and excellent moral character; Hadith extolling him; his juridical decisions; his physical appearance; his garments, seal, and armor; his marriages and children; his death; and elegies composed in his memory. Martyrologies of 'Ali are also many, second in number perhaps

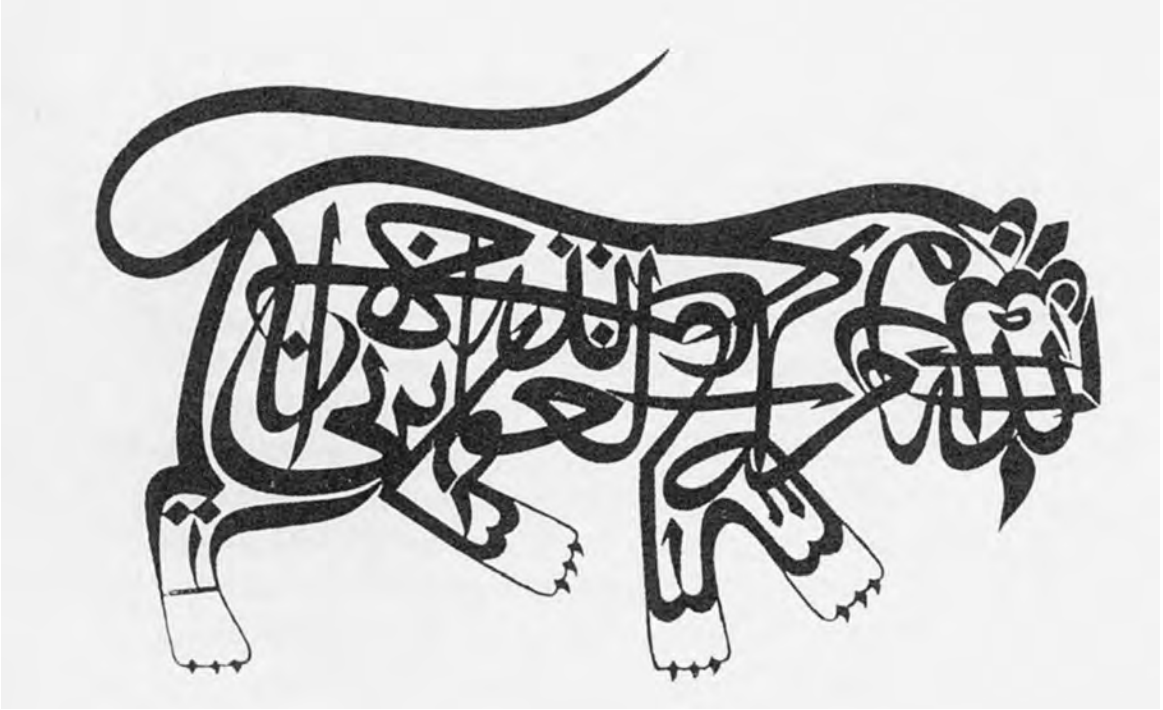
only to those written about his son al-Husayn; fourteen are listed by the Shiite bibliographer al-Tihrani, including ones by early authors such as Abu Mikhnaf. Finally, there are several monographs on 'Ali's battles, such as *Waq'at Siffin* (827, The Battle of Siffin) by Nasr ibn Muzahim al-Minqari. Other, similar monographs have been lost, and their names are known to modern scholars only through early biobibliographical works. All these historical works quote from 'Ali's orations and epistles to a greater or smaller extent, as do literary anthologies such as Ibn 'Abd Rabbih's *al-'Iqd al-Farid* (940, The Unique Necklace).

'Ali's words have been collected in a large number of works in both medieval and modern times. Early compilations are mentioned in biobibliographic works such as Ibn al-Nadim's *Kitab al-Fihrist* (Catalogue) and al-Najashi's *Rijal* (Shiite Prosopography). The earliest is probably the one attributed to a contemporary of 'Ali, al-Juhani. This compilation is now lost, as are many others, including those by the historians Abu Mikhnaf, Nasr ibn Muzahim, Ibn al-Kalbi, al-Waqidi, al-Mada'ini, Abu Ishaq al-Thaqafi, and al-Qadi al-Nu'man–losses that are detailed in 'Abd al-Zahra' al-Husayni al-Khatib, al-Sayyid's *Masadir Nahj al-balaghah wa asaniduhu* (1975, Sources and Isnads of the *Nahj al-balaghah*). A relatively early extant compilation is the one attributed to the eminent ninth-century prose writer al-Jahiz and includes a hundred maxims ascribed to 'Ali.

The most famous compilation of 'Ali's words is al-Sharif al-Radi's *Nahj al-balaghah,* compiled in the tenth century. This compilation consists of 238 *khutab* (orations); 78 *rasa'il* (epistles) and *wasaya,* or *'uhud* (testaments); 473 *hikam* (aphorisms); and 9 *gharib* (sayings including rare words). It is universally acclaimed as a masterpiece of Arabic literature and has enjoyed unprecedented currency through the centuries until the present day. One indication of its popularity is the fact that it has attracted more than two hundred commentaries, including the celebrated twenty-volume commentary by Ibn Abi al-Hadid. In modern times it has been translated into some thirty languages. In the words of Moktar Djebli in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (1954–2004), "This book has a tireless appeal, on behalf of faith in God and in His Prophet, of piety, of integrity, of justice and of rising above the vanities of this world." For the Shia in particular, the *Nahj al-balaghah* has a status second only to the Qur'an and the Prophetic Hadith. In Shiite belief, 'Ali's words have divine force in them, and their perusal imparts *barakah* (divine grace).

One of the first questions one must address when discussing a compilation assembled three centuries after the author's death is the question of authenticity. Modern scholars such as Laura Veccia Vaglieri, Djebli, and 'Abd al-Zahra' have shown that a large portion of the *Nahj al-balaghah* could indeed be attributed to 'Ali. 'Abd al-Zahra', for example, has identified as al-Radi's probable sources earlier historical and literary works. Another scholar, Wadad al-Qadi, investigated a *Nahj al-balaghah* testament analyzing external evidence such as recensions or quotations in other medieval sources, in conjunction with internal evidence such as its language and content, and argues that it is incorrectly attributed to 'Ali. A study of the entire compilation along these lines may produce a probably authentic core as well as some probably incorrect ascriptions.

It should be noted that al-Radi's stated criterion for selection was good style. He claimed to have put together a compilation that would serve as a model of Arabic eloquence, rather than a manual of law or a dogmatic treatise. Probably for this reason, he did not trouble to name most of his sources. Because of this omission, he laid himself open to accusations of forgery by later scholars. In the thirteenth century, three centuries after the compilation went into circulation, the Sunni biographer Ibn Khallikan raised doubts about the attribution of its contents to 'Ali, surmising in his *Wafayat al-A'yan* (Obituaries of the Notables) that perhaps the compiler of the *Nahj al-balaghah* was himself the author. He was followed by other historians who echoed his words. In modern times, the discourse about the authenticity of the *Nahj al-balaghah* has become divided along sectarian lines: the Shia generally consider it authentic in its entirety, while the Sunnis consider it largely spurious. A variety of arguments are put forward against the authenticity of the *Nahj al-balaghah,* namely that the compilation includes: invective against the Companions, which does not become a man of 'Ali's virtuous character; philosophical terminology such as *al-ayn* (the where) and *al-azaliyyah* (eternity) that only became current in Arabic literature in the ninth century after the translation movement from Greek to Arabic was under way; detailed descriptions of animals such as the peacock, which were not native to the Arabian Peninsula and therefore unlikely to have been observed by 'Ali, in addition to the fact that such descriptions do not occur elsewhere in the literature of the period; some long sermons that would have been difficult to memorize at one hearing and would therefore be difficult to transmit; and prophecies about future events such as the Zanj rebellion. The first argument is weak, as most of the invective the *Nahj al-balaghah* includes is against Mu'awiyah and his associates, and it is not difficult to believe that 'Ali should accuse the men he went to war with of deceit and low values. The next four arguments merit more serious consideration. They



Nineteenth-century Turkish wall hanging of a lion symbolizing ‘Ali. The lion is made up of calligraphy meaning “In the name of the lion of God, the face of God, the victorious ‘Ali” (from Bernard Lewis, ed., Islam and the Arab World: Faith, People, Culture *[New York: Knopf, 1976]).*

apply to only a small percentage of the *Nahj al-balaghah* and, as such, cannot be said to undermine gravely the attribution of the majority of its contents to ‘Ali.

The *Nahj al-balaghah* and other compilations of ‘Ali’s words cover a broad spectrum of themes. Some of the topics addressed are religious and ethical, including exhortations to virtues such as truthfulness, gratitude, and patience; expositions on the transitory nature of this world and the inevitability of death; the benefits of living a modest and temperate life; the importance of learning and the nature of true knowledge; discourses on the nature of God and his creation; praise of God and the Prophet; and prayers asking for abstract things such as forgiveness and practical things such as rain. A balance between rationality and doctrine as sources of knowledge and ethics can be perceived in his words. Many of ‘Ali’s aphorisms are commonly known: “Contentment is an inexhaustible treasure”; “Wisdom is a stray camel belonging to the Believer; so accept wisdom, even if it be from people of hypocrisy”; “Sleep accompanied by conviction is better than ritual prayer accompanied by doubt”; “Opportunity passes like the passing of clouds, so seize opportunities for good”; “This world is like the snake: its touch is soft, its poison fatal”; “People are enemies of what they do not know”; “Prayer is the weapon of the believer.”

Other topics addressed in the compilations are grounded in the historical context of ‘Ali’s life and caliphate. Examples are those orations and epistles related to administrative and military matters; *jihad,* or exhortations to battle evil, especially in the person of Mu‘awiyah; and descriptions of various contemporary historical figures: negative characterizations of opponents such as Talhah, al-Zubayr, ‘A’ishah (“the woman”), Mu‘awiyah, and ‘Amr ibn al-‘As; and positive pictures drawn of supporters such as Malik al-Ashtar, ‘Ammar ibn Yasir, Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, ‘Abd Allah ibn al-‘Abbas, and Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr.

‘Ali’s oratorical style is characterized by pithy utterances; a powerful, rhythmic assonance teamed with careful parallelism; an extraordinarily opportune choice of vocabulary; a profusion of Qur’anic allusions; vivid imagery, especially physical descriptions of desert life used to convey abstract concepts; and the utilization of logical categorization as a means of presenting material. All in all, ‘Ali was a remarkable orator. His sermons had a powerful effect at the time they were delivered and continue to guide and enthrall. He was also an exceptional penman, and his epistles came to be considered models of elevated thought and high style. Furthermore, he was considered a venerable sage, and many of his wise maxims became common proverbs.

'Ali's words, especially those collected in the *Nahj al-balaghah,* continue to exert tremendous influence on Arabic and Islamic literature.

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