The initial centuries after the Prophet Muhammad’s death witnessed the proliferation of diverse ideas and beliefs. It was during this period of roughly three centuries that two dominant intellectual traditions emerged, Sunnism and Shi‘ism. Sunni Muslims endorsed the historical caliphate, whereas Shi‘i Muslims lent their support to ‘Ali, cousin of the Prophet and the fourth caliph. The Shi‘a also articulated a distinctive set of theological doctrines concerning the nature of God and legitimate political and religious authority. This book examines the development of Shi‘i Islam through the lenses of belief, narrative, and memory. In an accessible yet nuanced manner, it conceives of Shi‘ism as a historical project undertaken by a segment of the early Muslim community that felt dispossessed. It also covers, for the first time in English, a wide range of Shi‘i communities from the demographically predominant Twelvers to the transnational Ismā‘īlīs to the scholar-activist Zaydis. The resulting portrait of Shi‘ism reveals a distinctive and vibrant Muslim community with a remarkable capacity for reinvention and adaptation, grounded in a unique theological interpretation of Islam.

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SHĪ‘Ī ISLAM

An Introduction

NAJAM HAIDER

Barnard College/Columbia University
For Saman, Ayaan, Shahzaib, and Sareena
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A number of people were pivotal in bringing this book to fruition. I thank Marigold Acland at Cambridge University Press for proposing the project and providing insightful comments in its formative stages. William McCants and Justin Stearns were incredibly helpful in reading and commenting on early iterations of the book proposal. They then generously offered feedback on drafts of chapters and (later) the full manuscript. I also benefited from valuable feedback on either individual chapters or the full book from Mona Abdallah, Aun Ali, Gene Garthwaite, Iago Hale, Abdullah Hamidaddin, Tariq al-Jamil, Hossein Kamaly, and Hussein Rashid. Many others have contributed to this book either directly or indirectly. These include Sumaira Arastu, Grace Bickers, Elizabeth Castelli, Celia Deutsch, Jack Hawley, Bernard Haykel, Gale Kenny, Amena Saeed Lone, and Intisar Rabb. A special thanks to Michael Cook and Hossein Modarresi for their meticulous feedback on a late version of the complete text. Although this book would not be possible without the help and support of my teachers, colleagues, and friends, I bear full responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation.
Note on the Cover Image

The cover image is an illustration of the investiture of ‘Alî by the Prophet at Ghadîr Khumm from the earliest extant illustrated manuscript of al-Birûnî’s (d. 1048) Āthâr al-bâqiya ‘an al-qurûn al-khâliya (commonly known as The Chronology of Ancient Nations) located in the Special Collections Department of Edinburgh University Library. The manuscript (Arab Ms. 161) was produced by the calligrapher Ibn al-Kutbî in 1307. Its geographic origin is not known with certainty, but possibilities include Maragha or Tâbriz, major urban centers of the Ilkhanîd dynasty (1256–1335). Recent scholarship has shown that the manuscript’s images, fusing Arab and Chinese motifs, served as the basis for many subsequent pictorial representations of the Prophet’s life.

Al-Birûnî’s text focuses primarily on competing calendrical systems. The Edinburgh manuscript intersperses the Arabic text with twenty-five illustrations of varying size. The image of the investiture of ‘Alî (folio 162r) is the final illustration and reflects a clear pro-Shi’î orientation. The manuscript is often discussed with reference to the conversion of the Ilkhanîd ruler Uljaytu (r. 1304–16) to Twelver Shi’ism in 1310, possibly through the influence of the Shi’î scholar Ibn al-Muṭḥāhar al-‘Allâma al-Ḥillî (d. 1325). The portrait of investiture is the largest of the manuscript, occupying almost an entire page.

In the illustration, note the swirling red and gold clouds and the dark blue sky, signifying the dramatic importance of the moment. The Prophet (on the left and cloaked) appoints ‘Alî (in a blue robe with his left hand on his sword) as his successor by reciting the formula “Of whomever I am the master (mawla), ‘Alî is his master (mawla).” Also significant is the Prophet’s placement of his left hand on ‘Alî’s shoulder. According to Priscilla Soucek, this gesture reflected a popular Iranian tradition in which individuals could forge intimate bonds that exceeded those of kin or marriage in importance through a ceremony performed on the day of the investiture (the eighteenth of the Islamic month of Dhû al-Ḥijja).
Note on the Cover Image

A final point to consider concerns the pictorial representation of the faces of the Prophet and 'Ali. There is no indication that this was considered religiously problematic in the Ilkhânid period. The three faces scratched out in the image likely belong to the first three Sunnî caliphs, Abû Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmân. Christiane Gruber interprets this act as a polemical attack on Sunnî religious claims rather than a general condemnation of pictorial representation.

For more on the cover image and the manuscript, see the following works:


A Note on Transliteration and Dating

The system of transliteration employed in rendering Arabic names, technical terms, and other phrases into Latin characters is essentially the same as that used in most modern academic journals (e.g., International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies or Islamic Law and Society). The primary exceptions to this strict transliteration are certain well-established locations that are referred to by their common names. Most prominent among these are the cities of Mecca and Medina and the geographic regions of Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Iran. Dates are given according to the Common Era calendar. This differs from the Islamic (Hijri) calendar, which is lunar and begins in the year 622 C.E. Death dates are provided at the first mention of each historical figure in the main text and repeated when considered appropriate.
Map 1. World Muslim Population Distribution

Nations With More Than 1 Million Muslims

- 1-5 million
- 5-10 million
- 10-50 million
- more than 50 million

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Map 2. World Sunni/Shī‘ī Population Distribution
Map 6. The Khoja Population of Pakistan and India