



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

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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



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.”