

ABSTRACTS

The Legacy of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib

Exploring his Teachings in the Foundational Texts of Arabic-Islamic Knowledge and Culture

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- 1. Ali, the Imamate and the Sovereign Bee: Ethics, Politics and Allegory in the Epistles of the Pure Brethren (*Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*)**
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This paper surveys explicit and implicit references to Ali b. Abī Ṭālib and the Alid imams in the Epistles of the Ikhwan Pure Brethren (*Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*). Special attention is given to three epistles: 'On Ethics' (epistle 9) contains various narrations connected in various ways with Ali; 'On Opinions and Religions' (epistle 42) focuses on the issue of the imamate, and 'On Animals' (epistle 22) includes an allegorical account of the Sovereign Bee (*ya'sūb*), which may have been intended as a symbol for the Imam. In support of this identification, the paper puts the passages from the Epistles in conversation with a) the hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have referred to Ali as the chief of the believers (*ya'sūb al-mu'minīn*), which appears in late 9th-century sources; and b) the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses on the bees (Q. 16:68-9) and on the river of honey (Q. 47:15), and honey in general, in various Ismaili sources, mostly from the Fatimid period.

- 2. The Problem of Divine Attributes: Ali's Perspective and Its Reception in Mu'tazili and Shi'i Thought**
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This article begins with an introduction discussing Imam 'Alī's sermons on monotheism and the tradition of their transmission in both Shi'i and non-Shi'i sources, including *Nahj al-Balāgha*. It then turns to the first sermon of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, which engages the attributes of God through a form of negative theology. The analysis explores the resonance of this theological approach within the development of Mu'tazili thought. To what extent, one might ask, were early Mu'tazili figures such as Abū al-Hudhayl and al-Nazzām influenced by these ideas? How, moreover, does the Mu'tazili distinction between attributes of essence (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*) and attributes of action (*ṣifāt al-fi'l*) reflect teachings attributed to Imam 'Alī? The inquiry also considers the contribution of the Jahmi theologians in the late second and early third centuries to this discourse, as well as the perspectives of early Shi'i theologians, including Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam, the Nawbakhtī family, and Shaykh al-Mufīd. In particular, it examines how their views on divine attributes intersect with the negative theology articulated in the first sermon of *Nahj al-Balāgha*. The aim is to uncover both the intersections and the divergences among these theological traditions, offering an analysis of their historical evolution and doctrinal interplay.

- 3. The Emirate of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the Threat of the Ṭulaqā'**
Sean W. Anthony, The Ohio State University

The division of the Prophet Muḥammad's followers into two broad camps is widely known: The Muhājirūn (or, "the Emigrants") were the earliest of his followers from Mecca who emigrated to join him in Yathrib after his *hijrah* to the city in 622, and the Anṣār (or, "the Helpers") were the Aws and Khazraj, the two Arab tribes of Yathrib who welcomed Muḥammad and his earliest followers and gave them shelter from the persecution of Mecca's Quraysh. Less widely known, however, is another subdivision of the Prophet's Companions: the so-called *tulaqā'* (or, "the Freedmen") – i.e., Quraysh who became Muslim only after the capitulation of Mecca to the Prophet in 630.

This study examines how the so-called Ṭulaqā' came to coalesce as a party in opposition to the emirate of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his efforts to reunite the *ummah* in wake of the assassination of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān,

how they came be identified with the Umayyad camp in particular, and, lastly, how the threat of the Tulaqā's rise to prominence features as a theme in the orations and letters attributed to 'Alī.

4. 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his historical influence on Qur'anic exegesis

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The intimate connection between 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the Qur'an is manifest in a variety of exegetical reports either connected with him or attributed to him in both Shii and Sunni works. Some sayings widely attributed to him concern the Qur'an's expansive multivalence, while others emphasize its inward depth, and the comprehensiveness of even the smallest fragment of the Qur'an, which can be said to contain the whole. Beyond his significant presence as a source of exegetical traditions in tafsīr collections, 'Alī's mastery of the Qur'an is demonstrated in the speeches and letters attributed to him and recorded in both literary and historical works. In these compositions, he not only quotes Qur'anic verses directly, but he also makes powerful and creative use of Qur'anic terminology, phraseology and diction and integrates it seamlessly with his own rhetoric, reflecting a deep internalization of Qur'anic language and a mind that thinks consistently in Qur'anic frames of reference.

Many of these speeches and letters, however, were reportedly composed during his caliphate, and in the context of the First Civil War, a time of great personal and communal struggle. 'Alī's approach to understanding the Qur'an was not developed purely in a situation of calm, intellectual and spiritual contemplation. It was also forged in the crucible of social and religious strife, in the context of which, the rhetorical power and multivalence of the Qur'an, often celebrated, became a source of misunderstanding and bitter conflict and was at times cynically manipulated for political purposes. Indeed, the misuse of the Qur'an's authority played a significant role in 'Alī's conflicts with both Mu'āwiya and the Kharijites who seceded from within his own camp. In this paper, I read 'Alī's contributions to Qur'anic interpretation and exegesis through the lens of his own political struggles, seeking to demonstrate how important this early conflict was in shaping his own insightful and nuanced approach to the Qur'an's multivalence, and through his influence, Muslim religious and intellectual approaches to their sacred text more broadly.

5. Imam Ali and the His Legal Judgments: Uncovering Processes of Attribution and Canonisation in early Shii Conceptions of Law

Robert Gleave, University of Exeter

Many legal positions attributed to Imam 'Alī (and judgements made by him in specific cases) are recorded in early Muslim legal literature. These can be found across a number of genres, including including *ḥadīths*, *akhbār*, *fiqh* and *khilāf* works). These judgements hold particular types of authority for later jurists – whether they are from Sunni, Shī'ī and even Ibādī traditions. However, only preliminary work has been done to explore the provenance of these reports, and to examine the coherence (or lack thereof) of the "jurisprudence" of Imam 'Alī. For example, collections of his legal judgements have become popular, and are presented almost as legal riddles (*alghāz*). In later standard *fiqh* works, one finds legal positions (which turn on a particular type of Quranic interpretation or extra-revelatory legal deduction) attributed to Imam 'Alī. In both Sunni and Shī'ī *khilāf* works, he is cited as holding opinions on details of the law; sometimes he even holds conflicting opinions on a legal issue and there are competing "transmissions" (*riwāyāt*) of Imam 'Alī's view. Schacht has argued that the legal doctrine of subsequent Shī'ī schools (be they Twelver, Isma'īlī or Zaydī) are best viewed as quite separate from the tradition around Imam 'Alī's own legal views (as recorded in these sources). The aims of each Shī'ī *madhhab* was to assert its distinct doctrine from its (primarily Sunni) competitors, he argues. This, in his view, led to the adoption of legal positions in the schools which were fundamentally unrelated to those attributed to Imam 'Alī. Schacht's ideas on early Islamic legal development have been challenged on many points, but this element of his theory is yet to be fully critiqued. In this paper I aim to revisit these issues through a series of case studies. My preliminary research has delineated a gradual coalescing of Shī'ī legal doctrine around opinions attributed to 'Alī, as his position as a unquestionable (and for some, inerrant) legal authority became a central doctrine for the Shī'ī trends. This means that Imam 'Alī's opinion was not irrelevant to legal doctrinal development in early Shī'ism, but that the processes of collection, canonisation and attribution were interrelated and ran parallel. That is, this was not merely an ex post facto reclaiming of Imam 'Alī's legacy.

6. Debates on the Preeminence of 'Alī in the Court of al-Ma'mūn

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In Sunnī and Shī'ī historiography, al-Ma'mūn (r. 198-218/813-833) is remembered as a clever caliph who sought to establish his sovereignty by making claims to both political *and* religious authority. He engaged in intellectual debates with Sunnī jurists and *ḥadīth* transmitters and established a reputation for himself as a pro-'Alid, Mu'tazilī-leaning, *ḥadīth* skeptic.

In the 'Abbāsīd royal court, al-Ma'mūn famously hosted numerous debates on subjects pertaining to law, theology, and philosophy. This essay examines one report in which the caliph is portrayed as a master dialectician who provides answers and rebuttals that silence and outwit his interlocutors in a debate with Sunnī jurists. The report is preserved in the Sunnī literary anthology *al-'lqā al-farīd* by Ibn 'Abd al-Rabbih (d. 328/940). In the report, al-Ma'mūn appears as the wise protagonist who must persuasively argue 'Alī's preeminence (*tafḍīl 'Alī*). Other historical sources report that al-Ma'mūn proclaimed the superiority of 'Alī to all other Companions in two public edicts. This debate preserved in *al-'lqā al-farīd* offers readers an opportunity to understand how this caliph, the Mu'tazila of Baghdad, and other pro-'Alids of the ninth century may have believed in 'Alī's preeminence while rejecting other Shī'ī doctrines.

Pro-'Alid sentiment or the veneration of 'Alī and his family is a prominent feature of Muslim culture. While pro-'Alid sentiment manifests itself in diverse ways, belief in 'Alī's preeminence was a cornerstone of Shī'ism that rarely found acceptance in non-Shī'ī circles. This essay examines the various arguments and texts that al-Ma'mūn reportedly cites to justify this doctrine against what many assumed to be a Sunnī consensus regarding the preeminence of Islam's first caliph—Abū Bakr.

7. The Sword and the Book: Reconstructing 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib's Scroll in Early Islamic Tradition

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This article examines the "Scroll of 'Alī" through a systematic *isnād-cum-matn* analysis applied to the Sunnī narratives. By grouping *ḥadīth* reports into five distinct transmitter clusters, it investigates how each cluster preserves partial contents of 'Alī's purported legal and ethical text, often described as attached to the scabbard of his sword. Comparisons with the Constitution of Medina reveal overlapping rulings regarding communal obligations and sanctified spaces, while other passages illustrate broader prophetic instructions. Situating these findings in early historical contexts, such as the aftermath of the Battle of the Camel, highlights the Scroll's role as a concise compendium of the Prophet's directives on governance, justice, and communal unity. The study concludes that 'Alī's codex was neither a "secret revelation" nor purely legendary, but a practical legal and ethical record reflecting the needs of a nascent Islamic society.

8. 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib's Ḥadīth in Classical Arabic Lexicography

Tynan Kelly, Khobar

Anyone who frequently uses Classical Arabic dictionaries knows that 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib's recorded speech (*ḥadīth*) plays an important role in shaping the Arabic lexicon. From Abū 'Ubayd's *Gharīb al-ḥadīth* to Ibn Manẓūr's *Lisān al-'arab*, 'Alī's words are found with a frequency only surpassed by the Prophet Muḥammad himself and rivalled only by the second caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. However, the distinctive nature of 'Alī's contribution remains underexplored. In fact, what sets his *ḥadīth* apart is an abundance of physical imagery and descriptions of the natural world, which beyond being merely a literary quality actually had a profound impact on the shape of the Arabic language. This paper compares 'Alī's *ḥadīth* with that of the Prophet Muḥammad and 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, as recorded in early works of *gharīb al-ḥadīth* ("unfamiliar words in *ḥadīth*") by Abū 'Ubayd's (d. 224), Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276), and Ibrāhīm al-Ḥarbī (d. 285). Further, I will investigate in what other works—legal, theological, literary and otherwise—these *ḥadīth* are found. In the *gharīb* works, 'Alī's *ḥadīth* contribute a disproportionate number of nouns as a result of his distinctive focus on natural imagery and the physical world, whereas 'Umar's *ḥadīth*, often more legal and action-oriented, contain a higher frequency of verbs, reflecting his focus on direct legal and verbal expression. The Prophet Muḥammad's *ḥadīth* contribute significantly to both categories. This difference is reflected in other works that quote this material. For example, in the Sunnī tradition, 'Alī's *ḥadīth* are found in literary compendia and works of literary criticism, whereas 'Umar's *ḥadīth* carry more agency in legal and theological works. In the Shī'ī tradition, 'Alī's *ḥadīth* figure prominently in literary works (there are many dedicated just to his speech); however, the *ḥadīth* found in the *gharīb* are not widely quoted in Shī'ī legal or theological works, which tend to prioritize different canons of *ḥadīth*. 'Umar, perhaps unsurprisingly, is not quoted frequently

within this tradition. This is an important observation in that it furthers our understanding how individual figures and genres—such as *ḥadīth*, the Qurʾān, and poetry—contributed to the Arabic lexicon and explains how different disciplines within the Arabic and Islamic sciences shaped the development of the Arabic language in unique ways.

9. Spawning Wonder: An Exploration of *Duʿāʾ al-Ṣabāḥ*, *Duʿāʾ Kumayl*, and *al-Munājāt*
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There are at least five hundred and thirty supplications attributed to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d.40/661) in the Shīʿī liturgical tradition alone. This paper will explore three of the most famous supplications attributed to ʿAlī, namely, *Duʿāʾ Kumayl*, *Duʿāʾ al-Ṣabāḥ*, and *al-Munājāt* which continue to be performed and have a voluminous living commentary tradition.

This study will be divided into two parts. The first part entails a study of the unique transmission and manuscript history of these three devotions as found in both Shīʿī and Sunni collections from as early as the 3rd/9th century. This portion of the study will demonstrate a shared transmission history when it comes to these three famous prayers as sources of devotional theology for Shīʿīs and Sunnis alike.

The second part of this study will involve a broad comparative textual analysis of the three texts all of which were composed to move the soul by means of Ali's verbal artistry (Qutbuddin, xvii). For the devout who believe these prayers to be the words of Ali, these texts are masterpieces of Arabic oration imbued with a noetic quality that represents the continuity of the certainty of faith after the Prophet. This certainty is coupled with a profoundly sober outlook on the tragedy of an unfettered self, doomed to destruction without divine embrace. These text of these celebrated supplications forms a *locus theologicus* embodying his deepest teachings on the relation between God and his servants in a language which is perhaps best described as that of self-effacing unconditional love.

10. The Legacy of ʿAlī ibn Abi Talib & His Descendants in 12th Century Damascus
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The Seljuk capture of Damascus in 1076 ushered an intense period of Sunnification in the city, which reached its zenith under the Nurids and Ayyubids. Interestingly, some of the architects of the Sunnification project displayed a profound veneration for imam ʿAlī and his descendants. I will focus my presentation on the testimony of Ibn ʿAsakir (1105-1176), who recorded in his *Taʾrikh madinat Dimashq* many traditions that highlight ʿAlī's distinction vis-à-vis other companions and praise his descendants who lived or passed through Damascus (in reality or imagination). My paper will analyze these traditions and propose some explanations for Ibn ʿAsakir's motives (including how the peculiar Shīʿī character of Damascus – due to more than a century of Fatimid rule – shaped his own veneration of ʿAlī). As such, my paper will emphasize the persistence of legacy and memory, and how Ibn ʿAsakir repackaged them for a Sunni Damascene audience (some of whom were recent Shīʿī converts to Sunnism).

11. The Name of ʿAlī in Architectural Inscriptions
Bernard O'Kane, American University in Cairo

The numerous inscriptions with the name of ʿAlī on monuments in Fatimid Egypt and Safavid Iran are not hard to find or explain. What is more surprising is the emphasis given to ʿAlī in buildings by Sunni sponsored patrons. These have a wide range, from Seljuq Anatolia to Mamluk Cairo, Ilkhanid and Timurid Iran, Chaghatayid Central Asia and even later in Ottoman territory. But of course veneration of the Prophet's family (ʿAlī was not only the Prophet's son-in-law but also his cousin) was by no means restricted to the Shīʿī; the ʿAlids as descendants of the Prophet were accorded respect and privileges unparalleled in Islamic society, regardless of political or religious affiliation. The vast numbers of shrines erected to members of the Ahl al-Bayt were from their inception patronized by both Sunni and Shīʿī alike, a situation that continued through the centuries into Ottoman times.

This paper will explore the contexts in which the name of ʿAlī appeared, whether alone or with other sacred names, on which parts of the buildings, and in which media. Second only to the name of the Prophet Muhammad, the variety in which his name was celebrated is still a striking feature of the Islamic heritage.

12. The Voice of ‘Alī in the Fatimid-Ṭayyibī Tradition: The Ethos of a Virtuous Society in the *Tanbīh al-Ghāfilīn* of Dā’ī Ḥātim b. Ibrāhīm
Aziz Qutbuddin, Fatemi Academy, Boston/ Mumbai

The third Fatimid-Ṭayyibī Dā’ī al-Muṭlaq, Ḥātim b. Ibrāhīm “Muḥyī al-Dīn” (d. 596/1199), was a prominent scholar and author who expounded the teachings of the Fatimid Imams in San’ā and the Ḥarāz mountains of Yemen. Among his works is *Tanbīh al-Ghāfilīn*, a concise treatise on ethics and communal life, framed as a response to a question—a common format of the time. The text articulates a vision of society bonded together by its spiritual lineage, faith and humanistic values.

This paper argues that the voice of ‘Alī resonates throughout the *Tanbīh*, shaping its vision of virtue. ‘Alī’s sayings—ranging from aphorisms to longer passages and letters—are accorded canonical and even divine status, cited with the same reverence as the Prophet Muḥammad’s Ḥadīth. These words on human conduct and moral values, those quoted here and the many sayings and orations not quoted here, form the ethical bedrock of the society Dā’ī Ḥātim envisions and seeks to cultivate.

The prominence of ‘Alī’s voice, both in citation and in philosophical influence, reflects a broader pattern: his sayings and orations are foundational to Fatimid-Ṭayyibī theology, ethics, and intellectual tradition.

13. *Tawḥīd*, the Afterlife, and Sacred Knowledge: Imam ‘Alī’s Legacy in al-Mu’ayyad al-Shīrāzī’s *Majālis Mu’ayyadiyya*
Tahera Qutbuddin, University of Oxford

For many Sunnis and all Shi’a, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is a central source of doctrine and guidance, though the way his presence is articulated varies. For the Fatimids, ‘Alī stands alongside the Prophet Muḥammad as the primary conduit of divine guidance. In the *Majālis Mu’ayyadiyya* of the Fatimid Chief Dā’ī al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078), ‘Alī’s words and spirit permeate the text, and sustained reflection on his exalted spiritual rank is a recurring theme. His teachings, for Mu’ayyad, serve two essential functions: they explicate the highest doctrines of *tawḥīd*—not merely affirming God’s unity but unfolding its profound metaphysical dimensions—and they cultivate a mindset of hereafter-mindedness as the foundation for virtuous and disciplined living. In this paper, I will trace these two prongs of ‘Alī’s presence and Mu’ayyad’s rationale for relying on Ali as the ultimate divinely guided guide—across the three major sections of the *Majālis*: (1) declarations of transcendent *tawḥīd* in the salutary *taḥmīd* opening, (2) urgent exhortations to piety in the section of pious counsel (*wa’z* or *maw’iẓa*), and (3) ‘Alī’s proclamations of his special knowledge in the final section on doctrinal exposition. In integrating these teachings, Mu’ayyad presents ‘Alī as the source of doctrinal truth and the guide for godly living, firmly anchoring Fatimid religious identity in his authority.

14. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and Biblical Typology in Medieval Shiite Texts
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In *Ḥadīth al-Manzilah*, the Prophet Muḥammad is supposed to have told ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, “You, with respect to me, are like Aaron with respect to Moses.” One of the common scriptural prooftexts cited as an argument for the authority of ‘Alī’s and his descendants after the Prophet, it refers to Biblical figures to make an analogical argument: the Prophet Muhammad is analogous to Moses, ‘Alī is analogous to Aaron, and just as Aaron was Moses’s foremost aide and successor, ‘Alī was Muhammad’s foremost aide and successor. Biblical typologies of this sort are common in the history of Shiite literature, though they have not been examined in a systematic way in scholarship to date, despite recent attention to the typology as an important rhetorical strategy in the Qur’an (Zwettler 1990; Stewart 2000; Griffith 2013). For example, al-Shaykh al-Mufid’s (d. 413/1022) likens ‘Alī to Jesus and John the Baptist in *Kitāb al-Irshād* on the grounds that he had profound wisdom as a small child; to Jesus because he could predict the future; and to Saul because he was the rightful ruler, supported by miraculous signs. This study looks at the use of Biblical analogies in stories of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in several major Shiite texts, including *Kitāb al-Irshād*, *Asās al-ta’wīl* by al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān (d. 363/974), *al-Majālis al-Mu’ayyadiyyah* by al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078) in order to ascertain what ideas they are intended to convey, how they help to construct particular images of Alī, and what functions such analogies serve, as opposed to direct references to incidents in the lives of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions.