

3 Community

Two historical narratives are shared by all Shī'ī groups. The first focuses on the succession to the Prophet and, specifically, the community's elevation of Abū Bakr to the caliphate over the superior claims of 'Alī. The second centers on the death of Ḥusayn (the Prophet's grandson) and a small contingent of his family and followers at the hands of an Umayyad army in 680. The discussion that follows explores the importance of each of these narratives in the construction of a distinct Shī'ī identity.

I. The Succession to Muḥammad

According to the Shī'a, the Muslim community's rejection of 'Alī marked a fundamental departure from Muḥammad's desires and represented a loss of legitimate political and religious leadership. As mentioned previously, this event is often cited as the starting point for the Sunnī-Shī'a division. In reality, however, its significance emerged gradually through its incorporation into a growing corpus of polemical arguments. The most important of these arguments combined (i) events and statements from the

Prophet's life with (ii) general expectations for succession embedded in the Qur'ān. The Twelvers and Ismā'īlīs were particularly interested in historical episodes that suggested that the Prophet had explicitly appointed 'Alī as his successor. This was a product of their requirement that an Imām be formally designated (*naṣṣ*) by his predecessor (see [Chapter 2](#)). The Zaydīs were bound by no such requirement and offered a more subtle case for 'Alī's claims grounded primarily in Qur'ānic expectations. Each of these arguments is discussed in this section.¹

Before proceeding, it should be mentioned that the field of early Islamic history has experienced a fundamental transformation in the last fifty years. New methodological developments have called into question basic assumptions about the Muslim historical sources. As many revisionist studies have shown, the reliability of these sources is suspect and must be tested on a case-by-case basis. The historical narrative presented here, however, is not the product of a close source-critical reading of the earliest layer of surviving historical evidence. Rather, it represents the Muslim community's collective memory of its formative years.²

II. The Tragedy at Karbala

In 680, Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (the Prophet's grandson) and a small contingent of his family and followers were killed by an Umayyad army at a site occupied by the present-day town of Karbala in southern Iraq. Shī'ī reports of the massacre are graphic and highlight Umayyad oppression and greed. These accounts vary in form and content, reflecting the differing theological concerns of individual Shī'ī groups. The Ismā'īlīs and the Twelvers frame Ḥusayn's death in almost apocalyptic terms, while the Zaydīs consider it the first in a series of failed 'Alid rebellions. The Twelvers, in particular, forward a Karbala narrative that is epic in scope and infused with

myriad supernatural features. For all three Shī'ī groups, the commemoration of Karbala is an important focal point for piety and a central component of communal identity.

A. The Base Narrative

The first period of civil strife in the Muslim community began with the murder of 'Uthmān in 656 and the election of 'Alī as the new caliph.²¹ 'Alī's authority was immediately contested by a group of prominent early Companions led by Ṭalḥa b. 'Ubayd Allāh (d. 656), al-Zubayr b. al-'Awwām (d. 656), and 'Ā'isha (one of the Prophet's widows and the daughter of Abū Bakr). The two sides met in 656 at the Battle of the Camel outside Basra (Iraq), with 'Alī winning a decisive victory. After consolidating control over Mecca and Medina, 'Alī settled in Kufa (in southern Iraq), moving the capital of the nascent Muslim state out of the Arabian peninsula. 'Alī continued to face opposition from Syria in the figure of Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān, the long-standing governor of the region and a cousin of 'Uthmān, who refused to pledge allegiance until 'Uthmān's murderers were brought to justice. The two sides were locked in a stalemate until 661 when 'Alī was assassinated, clearing the way for Mu'āwiya to seize sole possession of the

caliphate.

Mu'āwīya's reign marked a clear transition from an elective model of leadership based on religious standing to one of hereditary rule. He was the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty and ruled for nineteen years (661–80) from Damascus with little organized opposition. Mu'āwīya was unable, however, to secure the oath of allegiance for his son Yazīd, who was viewed by many Companions as unworthy of the office and morally deficient. When Mu'āwīya died in 680, the Muslim world was plunged into a second prolonged period of civil strife. The fiercest opposition to Yazīd's succession came from prominent figures in Medina who had their own claims to the caliphate. The most significant of these was 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr (d. 692), who declared himself caliph in 681 and won the support of many (if not most) parts of the Muslim world. Over the next ten years, Marwān b. al-Ḥakam (d. 685) and his sons managed to rally the Umayyads and slowly reasserted military control over Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and (finally) Arabia. Ibn al-Zubayr was killed after an extended Umayyad siege of Mecca in 692.

For the Shī'a, the most significant episode in the second civil war involved the 680 killing of Ḥusayn b. 'Alī by an Umayyad army near Karbala

(see [Table 3.1](#)). The consensus narrative (preserved in both Sunnī and Shī'ī sources) attributes the tragedy to Mu'āwiya's attempts at securing Yazīd's succession. Ḥusayn had inherited the leadership of the family of the Prophet after the death of his brother Ḥasan in 670 and adopted a quietist political stand during most of Mu'āwiya's reign. He was adamant, however, in his refusal to take the oath of allegiance to Yazīd. According to many sources, this was due to concerns about Yazīd's moral character, as he was said to indulge in wine and music. After Mu'āwiya's death, Ḥusayn began receiving letters from Kufa asking him to lead a rebellion against the Umayyads. Recall that Kufa was the seat of 'Alī's caliphate and home to his most enthusiastic supporters. Ḥusayn sent his cousin Muslim b. 'Aqīl to investigate the political situation. Muslim initially deemed the conditions in Kufa encouraging for a potential revolt and reported as much to Ḥusayn. The situation took a turn for the worse, however, when Yazīd heard of Muslim's intrigues and appointed 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād (known as Ibn Ziyād) (d. 686) governor of the region. Ibn Ziyād quelled Kufan opposition through a combination of threats and bribes, ultimately arresting and executing Muslim.

Table 3.1 *The Main Characters of the Karbala Narrative*

Personalities (in alphabetical order)	Brief Description/Background
'Abbās b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 680)	Ḥusayn's half-brother and standard-bearer. Killed in battle.
'Abd Allāh b. Ḥusayn (d. 680) (known as 'Alī al-Aṣghar)	An infant son of Ḥusayn. Died from an arrow wound on the day of the battle.
'Alī b. Ḥusayn (d. 712 or 713) (known as Zayn al-'Ābidīn)	The eldest son of Ḥusayn. He was ill and did not take part in fighting. He survived and came to be considered the fourth Imām by the Ismā'īlī/Twelve Shī'a.
'Alī b. Ḥusayn (d. 680) (known as 'Alī al-Akbar)	The second of Ḥusayn's sons. Killed in battle at age 19.

Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 680)	The son of 'Alī and Fāṭima. The primary protagonist in the narrative. Revered as an Imām by every Shī'ī group.
Muslim b. 'Aqīl (d. 680)	Ḥusayn's cousin who was sent to Kufa to investigate the situation and to ascertain the level of support for an uprising. He was killed by Ibn Ziyād.
Shamir b. Dhī al-Jawshan (d. 686) (known as Shimr)	One of the commanders of the Umayyad army and a confidant of Ibn Ziyād. Invariably depicted as the most vicious of Ḥusayn's adversaries.
'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād (d. 686) (known as Ibn Ziyād)	Yazīd's governor over Basra and Kufa. The primary antagonist in the narrative.
'Umar b. Sa'd (d. 686) (known as Ibn Sa'd)	In charge of the Umayyad army that fought Ḥusayn at Karbala. His forces consisted mostly of Kufans.

Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya (d. 683)	Umayyad caliph in Damascus. Seen as ultimately responsible for Ḥusayn's death.
Zaynab b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 682?)	Ḥusayn's sister and the daughter of 'Alī and Fāṭima. Assumed de facto leadership of the survivors after 'Āshūrā'.

Ḥusayn was unaware of these developments and set off for Kufa, accompanied by most of his family and a small group of supporters. The entire party numbered in the low hundreds. The narrative of Ḥusayn's journey is replete with foreboding about the unreliability of the Kufans and rumors that the Umayyads had solidified their control of the region. Even after Ḥusayn received confirmation of Muslim b. 'Aqīl's death, he decided against returning to Medina and continued on the road to Iraq. Ḥusayn's caravan was eventually intercepted by a squadron of cavalry and forced to make camp at Karbala, fifty miles to the northeast of Kufa. This occurred on the second day of Muḥarram, the first month of the Islamic calendar. The next few days witnessed a steady buildup of Umayyad forces

under the command of 'Umar b. Sa'd (known as Ibn Sa'd) (d. 686) and a growing stalemate between the two sides. Ibn Ziyād demanded that Ḥusayn and his men take the oath of allegiance to Yazīd; Ḥusayn categorically refused to do so. Some Sunnī sources report that Ḥusayn proposed a number of alternatives but to no avail.

On the seventh day of Muḥarram, Ibn Ziyād ordered Ibn Sa'd to deny Ḥusayn and his followers access to water. This accelerated the crisis and caused significant suffering in Ḥusayn's camp, especially among the numerous young children. According to some accounts, negotiations broke down on the ninth of Muḥarram due to the intrigues of some Kufans (notably Shamir b. Dhī al-Jawshan) who were intent on provoking hostilities. Ḥusayn asked for and was granted a final night of respite and prayer, which features prominently in many Shī'ī accounts of Karbala. The tents were brought together in anticipation of the next day's fighting, and permission was granted to anyone who chose to depart before battle. Zaynab, Ḥusayn's sister, is a major figure in the (later) Shī'ī accounts as she anticipates the events of the next day and prepares for her brother's impending death.

There are conflicting reports about the

sequence of events on the tenth of Muḥarram (known as 'Āshūrā'). There appear to have been a series of individual one-on-one encounters between the two sides throughout the morning. The real fighting began after the noontime prayer, as the Umayyad army slowly encircled the camp. The first skirmishes involved supporters not affiliated with the household of the Prophet, but, as the afternoon progressed, Ḥusayn's relatives engaged the enemy. It is difficult to parse legend from fact in these accounts. Some of the (non-Shī'ī) sources suggest that the entirety of the battle lasted only an hour, whereas other (Shī'ī) sources depict a drawn-out affair consisting primarily of single combat. The deaths of important 'Alids are mentioned in striking and vivid detail, notably those of Ḥusayn's two sons 'Alī al-Akbar and 'Alī al-Aṣghar and his half-brother al-'Abbās b. 'Alī. Ḥusayn was the last to fall. His body and the bodies of his supporters were then decapitated, and the camp was pillaged by Umayyad forces. The final death toll on the side of Ḥusayn was reported as seventy-two. The only surviving adult male from Ḥusayn's household was his son 'Alī (Zayn al-'Ābidīn), who was reportedly bedridden with an illness and therefore unable to take part in the battle.

The narrative of Karbala does not end with Ḥusayn's death. Most accounts chronicle the fate of his family members (mostly women and children), who were taken to Kufa and then sent with the heads of the dead to Yazīd in Damascus. There are significant contradictions in the sources regarding the initial encounter between the caliph and the prisoners. The Shī'ī sources depict a defiant Zaynab and an eloquent Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn confronting Yazīd at his court, followed by a prolonged imprisonment. The Sunnī sources, by contrast, note Yazīd's remorse, his financial compensation for the property plundered by Umayyad forces, and his designation of an escort to accompany the family back to Medina.