CHAPTER 14

Shiᶜism

The partisans of ᶜAli were not terribly successful at persuading the Muslim community to acknowledge the authority of their Imams. After the troubled caliphate of ᶜAli himself, none of his descendants or close collateral relations, i.e., those whom the various proto-Shiᶜi groups recognized as the rightful leader of the community and instrument of God's will, secured the broad allegiance of the *umma*. Still, the late eighth and ninth centuries were fruitful ones for Shiᶜism, as it was then that it acquired a more precise sectarian identity.

The success of the ᶜAbbasids resulted in the proto-Shiᶜis defining their expectations more sharply. The subversive movement had its roots in proto-Shiᶜism, as it drew on the widespread but unfocused support for "the chosen one from the family of Muhammad." But the chosen one turned out not to be a direct descendant of the Prophet, and eventually the ᶜAbbasids had to deal with the disappointment of those who expected something more, or at least something different. By 762, the ᶜAbbasids had the embarrassment of defending themselves against a revolt in the Hijaz, led by Muhammad ibn ᶜAbdallah, *al-Nafs al-Zakiyya* ("the Pure Soul"), the great-grandson of Muhammad's grandson son al-Hasan, who rejected the ᶜAbbasids explicitly on the grounds that they had usurped a position and power which rightfully belonged to a descendant of the Prophet. As Muhammad ibn ᶜAbdallah put it in a letter of challenge dispatched to the caliph al-Mansur,

> Our paternal ancestor, ᶜAli, was the *wasi* [i.e., the authorized legatee of Muhammad] and the *imam*, so how could you have inherited his *wilaya* [i.e., his sovereign authority] when his own descendants are still alive. Further you well know that no one has laid claim to this office who has a lineage, nobility, and status like ours. By the nobility of our fathers, we are not the sons of the accursed, the outcasts, and the freedmen! No one from the Banu Hashim [the larger clan to which Muhammad belonged] has the sort of bonds we can draw upon through kinship, precedence, and superiority.[1]

[1] Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk*, ed. M. J. De Goeje and others (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879–1901), 1/3.209–11 = *The History of al-Ṭabari*, vol. 28, trans. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 167–9.

But if the weakness of the ᶜAbbasids' pretensions to ᶜAlid support was now laid bare, so too was the power of the reigning dynasty: Muhammad ibn ᶜAbdallah's rebellion was easily crushed, as was another and larger revolt led by his brother Ibrahim in Basra.

The failure of these rebellions did not, however, spell the end of Shiᶜism. In the first place, their suppression may have contributed in some ways to the diffusion of ᶜAlid sentiments throughout the territories ruled by the Islamic state. Much of the support for the family of ᶜAli had traditionally been based in Iraq, particularly in the town of Kufa – southern Iraq remains to this day one of the demographic centers of Shiᶜi Islam – but in the late eighth and early ninth centuries there are signs that the movement was taking root elsewhere. The close identification of Iran and Shiᶜism of course belongs to a much later period, but already in the late eighth century the city of Qum had become associated with ᶜAlid partisans, albeit that most of them were Arabs and not Iranians. Refugees from the rebellions of 762 also ended up in Daylam, a mountainous province to the south and east of the Caspian Sea, and their presence there may be linked to the Shiᶜi inclinations of Daylami Muslims, from amongst whom emerged in the tenth century the Buyid amirs who played such an important role in the development of a sectarian Shiᶜism.[2]

More importantly, it was at precisely this moment that the Shiᶜis began to distance themselves from the ᶜAbbasid state, and lay the doctrinal foundations for what was to become sectarian Shiᶜism. The central figures in this process included Jaᶜfar al-Sadiq (d. 765), a scholar respected by Muslims of all schools and a descendant of Muhammad through his grandson al-Husayn, and Hisham ibn al-Hakam (d. 795–6), a pro-ᶜAlid theologian of the late eighth century. For those of proto-Shiʿi inclination, as perhaps for Muslims generally, the most vexing question was that of leadership. The Shiʿi doctrine of the Imamate, as articulated by Jaᶜfar, Hisham, and others, is of course immensely complicated, and in its Twelver (Imami) form cannot have been finalized until the tenth century. Even so, by the late eighth century, the contours of a distinctively Shiᶜi understanding of Muslim leadership could probably be discerned. At its core lies the conviction that God provides each generation of Muslims with an Imam, who as the rightful leader of the community is imbued with sovereignty over the world (*wilaya*), a sovereignty which comprises both religious and, at least in theory, political authority. The Shiᶜi Imam received his appointment by "designation" (*nass*) from his predecessor, as the Prophet had, in Shiᶜi recollection, appointed his cousin ᶜAli as his successor at Ghadir Khumm. Several characteristics of this Imam distinguish him from the ideal caliph as he was described by Sunni theologians. For example, the Imam is said to be *maᶜsum*, free of sin. Indeed, while strictly speaking his authority is not prophetic, in that the Imams do not bring with them a new law, as did Muhammad,

[2] On Qum, see Wilferd Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, NY: Bibliotheca Persica, 1988), 79–82; on Daylam, see Hugh Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 206–7.

Moses, and Jesus, they do nonetheless speak authoritatively on matters both religious and political. In the eyes of their followers, the Shiᶜi Imams retained that role as authoritative interpreters of divine law which in Sunni Islam gradually passed into the hands of the community as a whole, expressed through the consensus of the ulama. In later Shiᶜi theological speculation, the institution of the Imamate came to have a mystical character: it was described in different ways as forming a part of the cosmic fabric. Consequently, the Imamate is for Shiᶜis a *necessary* institution: that is, there *must* always be an Imam, an individual who can speak authoritatively on God's behalf.[3]

The Shiᶜi understanding of the Imamate implied a break with the rest of the Muslim community on doctrinal grounds, but also because it rested on the rejection of the actual course of early Muslim history. The problem is that, from a Shiᶜi perspective, the community had gone seriously astray in recognizing the authority first of Abu Bakr, and then of ᶜUmar and ᶜUthman, let alone their Umayyad and ᶜAbbasid successors. The centrality of this issue in the dynamic through which Sunni and Shiᶜi identities emerged is evident in the fact that, in these early stages, the name most commonly given to those we would now recognize as Shiᶜi was *rafidi*, as a group the *rafida* or *rawafid*, terms with a number of competing etymologies but which were commonly understood to reflect that they rejected (Ar. *rafadu*) the leadership of Abu Bakr and ᶜUmar.[4] For these Rafidis, later Shiᶜis, the Imamate was to be held by a member of the *ahl al-bayt*, "the people of [Muhammad's] house." The first Imam, of course, was ᶜAli, and most partisans of the *ahl al-bayt* identified the second and third Imams as his sons al-Hasan and al-Husayn. The trick lay in identifying those who followed. The ambiguity, as we have seen, allowed the ᶜAbbasids, collateral relations of the Prophet, to harness temporarily the passions of the partisans of his family; and indeed, as long as that uncertainty persisted, it is difficult to speak with any precision about a distinctive Shiᶜi group, as opposed to a general tendency to privilege the family of the Prophet on questions of leadership. But gradually over the first few decades of ᶜAbbasid rule, that ambiguity dissipated. The pivotal figure was probably Jaᶜfar al-Sadiq who was recognized by many of the proto-Shiᶜa as the rightful Imam. Jaᶜfar's imamate shaped the future of Shiᶜism in several ways, most immediately by focusing the expectations of the partisans of the House of ᶜAli on the Husaynid line, that is, on ᶜAli's descendants through his son al-Husayn, which in this generation was represented most notably by Jaᶜfar. Moreover, Jaᶜfar explicitly accepted political realities, and – unlike those who came to be known as Zaydi Shiᶜis, who in principle accepted as Imam any member of the Prophet's family who actively resisted the rule of an unjust Muslim – made no effort to rebel against the ᶜAbbasids and assert his right to rule. Jaᶜfar's quietism in effect

[3] For summaries of the Shiᶜi doctrine of the Imamate, see Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shiᶜism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1981), and Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shiᶜi Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiᶜism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 147–60.

[4] See *EI*², "al-Rāfiḍa" (by. E. Kohlberg).

provided a model for later Shiᶜis, through which it was possible to reconcile the authority of the Imam with the actual and, from a Shiᶜi perspective, tragic course of historical events within the Muslim community.

The early ᶜAbbasid period proved fruitful for Shiᶜism. The imperial metropolis, Baghdad, along with Kufa and Qum, acquired a significant Shiᶜi population. Eventually, much of that population was concentrated in the Karkh quarter, to the south of the original round city. Partisans of the family of ᶜAli could be found in the highest circles. The Shiᶜi theologian Hisham ibn al-Hakam was an intimate courtier of the vizier Yahya ibn Khalid, of the famous Barmaki family, which itself may have had Shiᶜi inclinations. Other Shiᶜis, including members of the al-Furat family, served the ᶜAbbasids as viziers and in other high administrative offices. The circulation of both Shiᶜis and Shiᶜi ideas at the ᶜAbbasid court itself is a reminder that, at this fertile moment in the development of Islam, terms such as *Shiᶜi* must be used cautiously, or at least as indicating a much broader group than it now does. For a moment in the early ninth century, it appeared that the emerging gap between ᶜAbbasids and Shiᶜis might be bridged, when the caliph al-Maᵓmun suddenly appointed ᶜAli al-Rida, the grandson of Jaᶜfar al-Sadiq and the family member recognized by many contemporary Shiᶜis as the living Imam, as his successor. It is not clear exactly what al-Maᵓmun intended by this move, not least because ᶜAli was twenty years senior to the caliph, but it surely reflected an effort on the part of the ᶜAbbasids to re-harness, or at least to co-opt, the political allegiance of those Shiᶜa who were uneasy with ᶜAbbasid leadership – which is, if nothing else, testimony to the strength of the Shiᶜi movement within Islamic society at this historical moment.[5]

But Shiᶜism's relationship to the ᶜAbbasid state remained problematic, and this made publicly identifying oneself as a partisan of the House of ᶜAli somewhat precarious – a situation which encouraged Shiᶜis to practice what they called *taqiyya*, according to which it is permitted to dissemble regarding one's Shiᶜi convictions in the face of persecution. Al-Maᵓmun's flirtation with a political alliance with the Shiᶜi Imam may have cooled in the face of persistent Shiᶜi rebellions, and in any case, ᶜAli died – poisoned at the caliph's orders, say a number of sources – while accompanying al-Maᵓmun on his journey from Marv, in eastern Iran, to Baghdad to re-assert his authority in the capital. The situation of later Imams grew more and more difficult, the tenth and eleventh in succession from the Prophet, ᶜAli al-Hadi and his son Hasan al-ᶜAskari, living under virtual house arrest in Samarra. The ᶜAbbasids appear to have cultivated rivalries within the family of the ᶜAlid Imams, as a way of weakening the potential influence of any one claimant to the Imamate, and even went so far as to assign midwives the task of monitoring the women of the Imams' households so as to detect

[5] On the strength of Shiᶜism in the late eighth and ninth centuries, see Andrew J. Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shīᶜism: Ḥadīth as Discourse Between Qum and Baghdad* (London: Curzon, 2000), 1–11; on ᶜAli al-Rida and his abortive appointment as caliphal heir, see Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophet in the Age of al-Maᵓmūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 28–32, and 70–106.

pregnancies, any one of which could, in theory at least, pose a significant challenge to their authority. As a distinctive Shiᶜi identity crystallized around a persistent dissatisfaction with the ruling house, public expressions of devotion to the House of ᶜAli grew more difficult and dangerous. As a mark of the tension, in 850 the caliph al-Mutawakkil ordered the destruction of the tomb of al-Husayn ibn ᶜAli at Karbala, explicitly, it appears, to prevent the pious visitation of the tomb which had become an important ritual for Shiᶜi Muslims. According to the report recorded by al-Tabari, the authorities threatened to arrest anyone found visiting the grave after its destruction. In Baghdad itself, Shiᶜi worshipers could find their mosques destroyed by agents of the ᶜAbbasid authorities, and those who gathered there arrested and imprisoned.[6]

Over the ninth century, the Shiᶜi community was forced to begin the process of developing structures of authority, built around the leading Shiᶜi ulama, independent of the Imams themselves. Several Imams in this period were minors. Moreover, with the Imams living under varying degrees of enforced isolation, contacts with the Shiᶜi faithful were necessarily more erratic. The tenth and eleventh Imams, for example, communicated furtively with their followers and received from them financial support through a network of agents, some of whom passed messages and money hidden in containers of cooking fat. Such difficulties may have encouraged the development of alternative loci of religious and judicial authority within the Shiᶜi community, theoretically subservient to but to some extent independent of the Imams, and so enabled them to survive this moment of persecution as well as the longer period of occultation which followed.[7]

The critical moment for Shiᶜism came at the end of the ninth century. In late 873, the eleventh Imam, Hasan al-ᶜAskari, living in confinement in Samarra, became ill and, after a short time, died. He was young – only twenty-nine years of age – and the question arose as to whether or not he had produced an heir. The uncertainty produced a predictable range of answers: that Hasan had not actually died, but merely gone into temporary occultation; that the Imamate had passed to other members of his family; finally, that he had in fact had a son, named Muhammad, whose identity and whereabouts were kept secret to protect him from persecution at the hands of the ᶜAbbasids and other enemies. It was the latter conviction that proved to have the most promising future, and over the tenth and early eleventh centuries, particularly under the patronage of the Buyid amirs who came to power under the titular rule of the ᶜAbbasid caliphs in the mid-tenth century, gave rise to the Twelver or Imami sect, today numerically the largest Shiᶜi grouping. The twelfth Imam was identified as Hasan's son, Muhammad *al-Muntazar*, "the awaited one." His disappearance and occultation took on cosmological significance: it was he who would return at the end of time to usher

[6] Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1/3.1407 = *History*, vol. 34, trans. Joel L. Kraemer (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 110–11; Jacob Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 97–8.

[7] Etan Kohlberg, "Imam and Community in the Pre-Ghayba Period," in *Authority and Political Culture in Shiᶜism*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 25–53, esp. 37–40.

in the final days, when God's plans for the Muslim community would at last be fully realized.[8]

Over the ensuing decades, the Twelver Shiᶜi community took a distinctive sectarian as well as doctrinal shape. It was in this period, for example, that the Shiᶜi scholar al-Kulayni (d. 941) compiled the collection of traditions (*Kitab al-kafi*) that came to play a foundational role for Shiᶜi law roughly comparable to that played by al-Bukhari's and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj's collections of hadith in the formation of Sunni jurisprudence. Shiᶜi scholars in the late ninth and tenth centuries began to construct a theological system which could account for the disappearance of the infallible Imam and, in part by drawing on the Muᶜtazili emphasis on the exercise of human reason, justify the prerogative of the scholars to interpret the Imam's will in his absence.[9] This would prove critical both to the emergence of a distinctive Twelver Shiᶜi communal identity, and also to later Twelver doctrines that stressed the authority of the leading Shiᶜi ulama, including the doctrine of the "deputyship of the jurist" which the Ayatollah Khomeini would, in the twentieth century, employ to such effect.

The arrival on the scene of the Buyid amirs in the middle of the tenth century proved especially propitious for Twelver Shiᶜism. The Buyids, originally Zaydi Shiᶜis, did not eliminate the ᶜAbbasid caliphate, but they did cultivate the support of Twelver Shiᶜis once they had come to power in Baghdad. Doing so may have been convenient for them – since the last Imam of the Twelver line had disappeared some seven decades before their arrival in Baghdad, recognizing the sovereignty of the "Hidden Imam" would involve no limitation on the Buyids' own authority. In any case, the Buyids supported the articulation of a distinctive Twelver identity, for example by patronizing Twelver scholars. They also strengthened the Shiᶜi community by honoring its leading figures, such as the brothers al-Sharif al-Radi (d. 1016) and al-Sharif al-Murtada (d. 1044), who served as *naqibs* (representatives or supervisors) of those claiming membership in the Prophet's family, and relying on them for a variety of political and diplomatic functions. The public cursing of the first three caliphs – i.e., those who had, in Shiᶜi eyes, usurped ᶜAli's rightful position – contributed to an atmosphere of religious tension. When the Buyid amir Muᶜizz al-Dawla in 962 went so far as to order that curses of the first caliphs be painted on the walls of Baghdad's mosques, it is reported that opponents of the Shiᶜa furtively blotted out the slogans, a clear sign of heightened religious competition. The Shiᶜis now distinguished themselves in various ways, in particular through their public commemoration of various key events in the Shiᶜi reconstruction of early Islamic history – the martyrdom of al-Husayn at Karbala was remembered, for example, with noisy public penance on ᶜAshuraᵓ (the tenth day of the month of Muharram), while the Prophet's alleged

[8] For the development of this doctrine, see Etan Kohlberg, "From Imāmiyya to Ithnā-ᶜAshariyya," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39 (1976), 521–34, and Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, passim.

[9] Andrew J. Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shīᶜism: Ḥadīth as Discourse Between Qum and Baghdad* (London: Curzon, 2000),12–31.

recognition of his cousin ᶜAli as his successor at Ghadir Khumm became an occasion for major Shiᶜi celebration.

But the central issue was one of religious authority, for it went to the heart of how the different religious communities defined themselves. So, for example, as the Muslim scholars came to insist upon the importance of the Prophetic *sunna* in establishing what was genuinely Islamic, and upon the priority of hadith in determining what that *sunna* consisted of (a process critical to the formation of what came to be a "Sunni" identity, and which we will discuss more fully below), and upon the authority of the community through its consensus (*ijmaᶜ*) in determining which hadith were genuine, the Shiᶜis marked themselves off by their distinctive approach to the question. They did so either by tracing the transmission of hadith through individuals closely associated with the ᶜAlid cause, rather than those who came to be recognized by the Sunni tradition as authoritative transmitters, or (more radically) by insisting that all hadith must be traced back either to the Prophet or to those descendants of his identified as their Imams, thereby shifting the locus of authority from the community as a whole to the Imams. The distinctiveness of the Shiᶜi community is reflected in the advice allegedly given by an Imam regarding Shiᶜi Muslims who needed legal guidance but who could not locate an acceptable (i.e., Shiᶜi) scholar: that they should seek the opinion of a Sunni *faqih* (jurist) and then do the opposite.[10]

Not, of course, that the Shiᶜis themselves were united. Shiᶜism began as a rather vague and undefined movement of support for the leadership of someone from the family of the Prophet, and as we have seen there were many who claimed that role. Most of this discussion has focused on the group that hindsight would identify as the Twelver Shiᶜis. In the modern world, the Twelver form of Shiᶜism is dominant, but that was not necessarily true in the early centuries, when the specific Shiᶜi sects did not yet exist in their later, precise formulation. There were many individuals and lineages which competed for the support of those inclined to look to a descendant of ᶜAli's for leadership. Of the non-Twelver Shiᶜi sects which emerged from this doctrinal turbulence, the most important was the Ismaᶜiliyya. In the eyes of many medieval Muslims, the Ismaᶜilis constituted the Islamic heresy *par excellence*. The Islamic heresiographical tradition, both Sunni and Twelver Shiᶜi, engaged in a highly critical, at times vitriolic attack on Ismaᶜilism, and one of the problems in reconstructing the history of the sect is that most of the relevant sources were produced in anti-Ismaᶜili circles. The situation is further complicated by several other factors, including the diversity of the Ismaᶜili tradition, which survived into modern times in a bewildering variety of sects, and also the Ismaᶜili emphasis on transmitting and understanding the inner secrets (*batin*) of things, as opposed to the obvious but incomplete external meaning (*zahir*), secrets which adepts were sworn not to reveal to the uninitiated, on pain

[10] Kohlberg, "Imam and Community," 38. The anecdote is attributed to several Imams, although it is preserved in a work of the tenth-century Shiᶜi scholar Ibn Babawayh.

(according to a relatively late Sunni source) of forfeiting their slaves, their property, and their wives.[11]

The issue that separated Ismaᶜili from Twelver, and then one Ismaᶜili group from another, was that of the identity and authority of the Imam. The point of departure from the main stem of Imami identity and allegiance was the eldest son of Jaᶜfar al-Sadiq, Ismaᶜil, although a distinctively Ismaᶜili *sectarian* group probably did not emerge until a century or more after Ismaᶜil's death. Ismaᶜil was a problematic figure in several respects. Hostile Sunni and Twelver sources describe him as a drunkard and a heretic; moreover, he appears to have died before his father. For both reasons, Twelver Shiᶜis rejected the claim of his followers that he was the rightful Imam. His partisans, naturally, thought otherwise, some arguing that Ismaᶜil had not in fact died, but rather had gone into occultation, others recognizing his son Muhammad as the heir, either of Ismaᶜil or directly of Jaᶜfar himself. What is important to the historian is the confusion itself, as a reminder that the lines of successive Imams recognized by later Shiᶜis were not so clearly defined at the time.

Ismaᶜilism posed an active challenge to the identity and authority of the Islamic tradition as it crystallized in the ninth and tenth centuries. The history of Ismaᶜil's followers in the decades following his death (or disappearance) is difficult to trace, as are the precise connections between them and the later, fully-formed Ismaᶜili groups; but suddenly in the second half of the ninth century organized groups of Ismaᶜilis appear in the historical record, conducting a highly-disciplined missionary campaign the goal of which was to reorient the *umma* in an Ismaᶜili direction. It was only natural that the Ismaᶜili mission (*daᶜwa*, the "calling" or "summoning") would be active in southern Iraq, given the historical concentration of Shiᶜis there and the proximity of the imperial metropole. But the diffusion of that mission, with its appearance in Sind, Khurasan and other eastern provinces, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, as well as (ultimately, to greater effect) North Africa, reflected the scope and ambition of the movement, which sought a radical reorientation of the Islamic world.[12] Ismaᶜili Shiᶜism demonstrated a pronounced tendency to fracture into competing sects, divided over points of doctrine and especially over who was to be recognized as Imam. But despite their fissiparousness, the Ismaʿilis resisted the dominant Islamic order, actively and sometimes violently. Ismaᶜili uprisings and organized military campaigns were a recurrent feature of life in Syria and especially Iraq during the early tenth century.

[11] See Heinz Halm, "The Ismaᶜili Oath of Allegiance (*ᶜAhd*) and the 'Sessions of Wisdom' (*Majalis al-hikma*) in Fatimid Times," in *Mediaeval Ismaᶜili History and Thought*, ed. Farhad Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 91–115, esp. 96–7. For general studies of the Ismaᶜili sect, see Wilferd Madelung, "Fatimiden und Bahrainqarmaten," *Der Islam* 34 (1959), 34–88; idem, "Das Imamat in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre," *Der Islam* 37 (1961), 43–135; Farhad Daftary, *The Ismaᶜilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), S. M. Stern, *Studies in Early Ismaᶜilism* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1983); *EI*², art. "Ismāᶜīliyya" (by W. Madelung).

[12] See, for example, S. M. Stern, "Ismaᶜili Propaganda and Fatimid Rule in Sind," and "The Early Ismaᶜili Missionaries in North-West Persia and in Khurasan and Transoxania," in *Studies in Early Ismaᶜilism*, 177–88 and 189–233.

The most serious challenge to emerge from Ismaᶜili Islam was that posed by the Fatimids. Until the end of the ninth century, Ismaᶜili expectations focused on the imminent return of Muhammad ibn Ismaᶜil. At this point, however, a leader of the sect named ᶜUbayd Allah claimed the imamate for himself. ᶜUbayd Allah's genealogy – that is, his relation to the expected Muhammad ibn Ismaᶜil – is a matter of some dispute, but the consequences of his assertion were twofold. In the first place, it provoked a split within the sect (of a sort which was to become common), as some Ismaᶜilis refused to recognize his claims and remained loyal to the hidden (and awaited) Imam, Muhammad ibn Ismaᶜil. Secondly, ᶜUbayd Allah himself moved to North Africa, where the way had been prepared for him by his missionaries, and where he now established a caliphate to rival that of the ᶜAbbasids and took for himself the *al-Mahdi*, an explicitly messianic term by which the hidden Imam was to be known upon his return. By 969, the Fatimids had conquered Egypt, where they constructed a new capital city, Cairo, and from which they pursued an active campaign to convince Muslims everywhere of the authority of their imamate.

Not all Ismaᶜilis accepted the claims of ᶜUbayd Allah and the Fatimids. Among them were the followers of several Ismaᶜili missionaries operating in Iraq, Bahrayn, and elsewhere, who came to be known as the Qarmatians. The Qarmatians established a state based in Bahrayn in the Persian Gulf in the early tenth century, which for long posed a significant threat to both the Fatimids and the ᶜAbbasids. In the 920s, the Qarmatians, driven by expectations of the imminent return of Muhammad ibn Ismaᶜil, pressed a campaign against the ᶜAbbasids which almost resulted in the capture of Baghdad itself. The Qarmatian challenge threatened the foundations of ᶜAbbasid legitimacy. Among their favorite targets, for example, were caravans of pilgrims passing through, under ᶜAbbasid protection, to the holy cities in Arabia. Finally, in 930 the Qarmatians of Bahrayn conquered Mecca during the pilgrimage season, slaughtering thousands of Muslim pilgrims and carrying off the venerated Black Stone, which was only returned in 951 after the ᶜAbbasid government had paid a considerable ransom.[13]

The Ismaᶜili challenge to Sunni Islam was immediate and political, but it was also doctrinal. The fully-formed Ismaᶜili tradition itself is characterized by considerable diversity, but several areas of Ismaᶜili doctrine claim our attention here. Ismaᶜili views on the central issue of leadership reveal a creative and syncretistic stratum in early Islamic thinking which can easily be obscured by the sheer mass and momentum of the matured Sunni and Twelver Shiᶜi traditions. Ismaᶜilism asserts the fundamentally cyclical character of human history, which has known six "speaking" (*natiq*) prophets, bearers of law in its external guise (*zahir*) – Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad – each of whom was followed by a "silent" (*samit*) one, who secretly reveals the hidden, inner meaning (*batin*) to the initiated. The work of the *samit* is furthered by seven successive Imams in each cycle. In that beginning with Muhammad's *samit* ᶜAli,

[13] *EI*², art. "Ḳarmaṭī" (by W. Madelung).

the seventh Imam is identified as Muhammad ibn Ismaᶜil, who has gone into occultation but who upon his reappearance will be recognized as the seventh and final *natiq*, and as the *qa'im* ("one who rises") and *mahdi* ("rightly-guided one") who brings God's final and most complete revelation and will, in the process, usher in the final days of judgment. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, further Ismaᶜili theological speculation drew explicitly on neo-Platonic concepts to fashion an even more elaborate cosmology. More generally, there was an inclusive, almost latitudinarian outlook in much early Ismaᶜili speculation, which contributed to the hostility with which Sunnis viewed the Ismaᶜilis, whom they accused of succumbing to "the efforts of the faiths superseded by Islam to insinuate themselves into Islam and thus eventually to destroy and replace it."[14] That open-ness to dialogue with other religious traditions, and especially the influence of neo-Platonism, is fully at work in the treatises known as the "Epistles" of the *Ikhwan al-Safa*, or "Brethren of Purity," which probably emerged from Ismaᶜili circles in Basra in the early- or mid-tenth century. And it had practical consequences, too, for example in the generally tolerant religious policies of the Fatimid caliphs, once they had come to power.[15]

Above all, the Ismaᶜili movement aimed not simply at replacing the existing caliph with an Imam recognized by his followers as the rightful leader of the *umma*, but rather at the revolutionary transformation of Islamic society. Messianic movements in general tend to have a revolutionary coloring, as expectations of the imminent arrival (or return) of an individual charged by God with implementing his will and ushering in the end of time can easily stoke and feed upon social and economic grievances. Ninth- and tenth-century Ismaᶜilism was fully messianic in this sense. The Ismaᶜili doctrine of cyclical history implied that, in returning, the *mahdi/qaᵓim* would surpass or complete the work of the Prophet. His appearance would mark the abrogation of the law which Muhammad had brought; his followers would from this point be able to live exclusively according to the *batin*, the inner truth. For some Ismaᶜilis, such as the Qarmatians, the imminence of the hidden Imam's return was not just a rhetorical matter: it was the expectation that the messianic age and the abrogation of the law was upon them that drove the Qarmatians to such radical steps as, for example, their attacks on pilgrims and

[14] Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Ismaᶜilism* (Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1940), 90.

[15] There has been considerable discussion of the origins and authorship of the Epistles; compare *EI*², art. "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'" (by. Y. Marquet) with S. M. Stern, "New Information about the Authors of the 'Epistles of the Sincere Brethren," in idem, *Studies*, 155–76, and Ian R. Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 95–104. On the theological inclusiveness of Ismaᶜilsm and its connections to Gnosticism and neo-Platonism, see Lewis, *Origins*, 93–6; Henri Corbin, "De la gnose antique à la gnose ismaélienne," in *Oriente e Occidente nel Medioevo* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1957), 105–43; Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, 53–77; Heinz Halm, "The Cosmology of the pre-Fatimid Ismaᶜiliyya," in *Mediaeval Ismaᶜili History*, ed. Daftary, 74–83; Azim A. Nanji, "Portraits of Self and Others: Ismaᶜili Perspectives on the History of Religions," in *ibid*., 153–60; Paul Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Yaᶜqūb al-Sijistānī* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and idem, *Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī: Ismāᶜīlī Thought in the Age of al-Ḥākim* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999).

the Muslim holy sites. The Fatimids, who came to rule over a large and diverse state, had to make certain adjustments in Isma^{c}ili doctrine. For example, they toned down the antinomianism which was characteristic of more radical Isma^{c}ili groups, and supported the work of Isma^{c}ili jurists such as the *qadi* al-Nu^{c}man (d. 974) in developing a body of Isma^{c}ili law, an Isma^{c}ili *shari^{c}a*. But they could not fully suppress the revolutionary impulse of Isma^{c}ili Islam, as we shall see in the following chapter. Isma^{c}ilism constitutes a reminder that Islam, by the late ninth and tenth centuries, no longer represented a novel response to the religious challenges of late antiquity or the ideological bond of a narrow and alien elite, but had instead become the ideology undergirding the Near Eastern status quo.