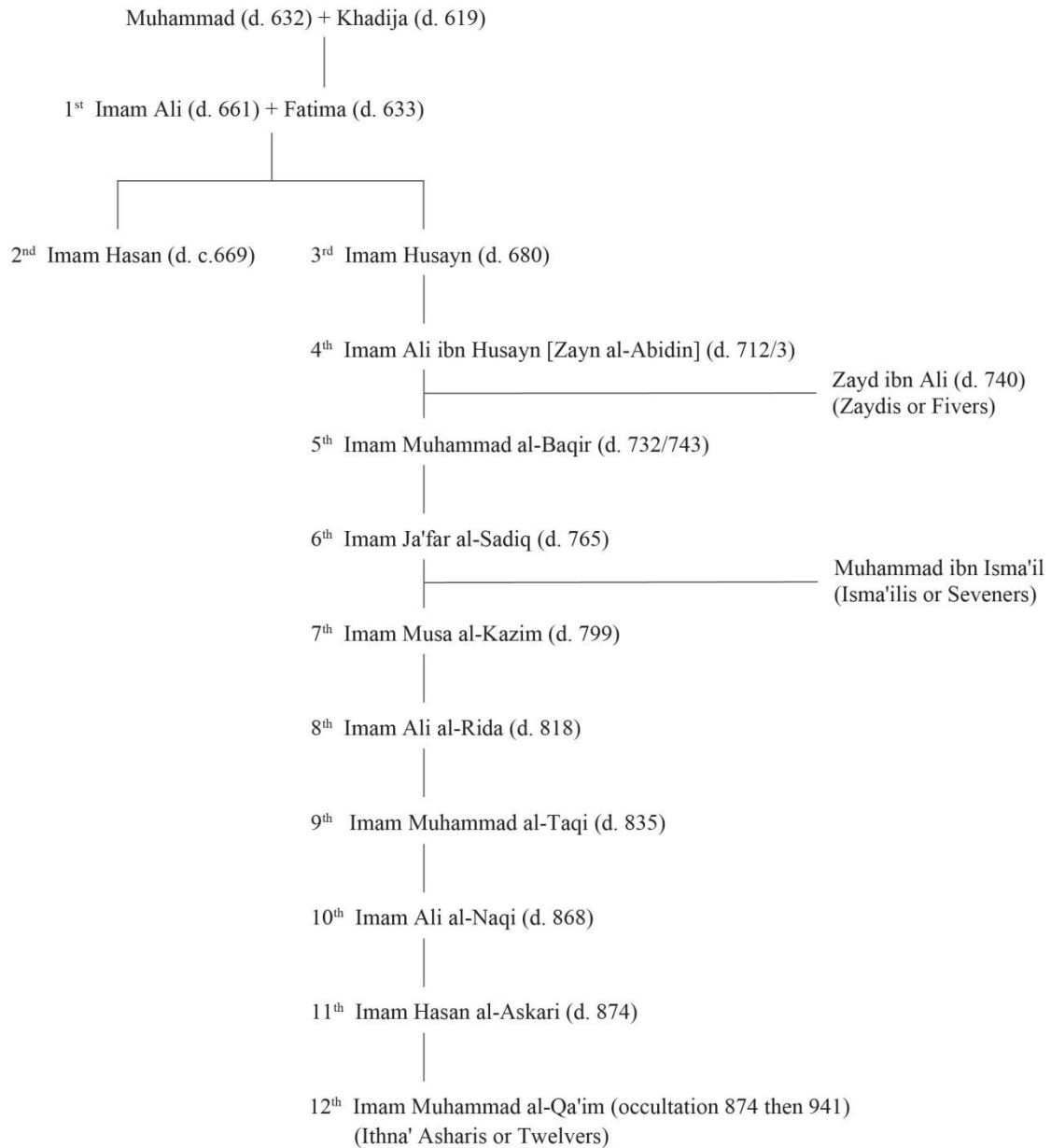


## Background article: Sources, Sunni and Shi'a: Succession and Imams

### A Line of Imams



We have seen the way in which Ali is held by the Shi'a to have been divinely appointed as the first Imam in succession to Muhammad. He was assassinated in Kufa, Iraq, in 661. Before Ali died, he designated his eldest son Hasan as his successor. There were still tensions with the Umayyads, who were increasing their power based in their new capital of Damascus. Imam Hasan withdrew from political life and concentrated on the spiritual leadership of his followers. He made a pact with Mu'awiya, the Umayyad Caliph, that he would live quietly in Madina and not become the focus of rebellion against the Umayyads. He remained the rightful Imam for the Shi'a, who believe that he was entitled to the political leadership of the whole Muslim community although this was not possible in the circumstances. He died in c.669 and was buried in the cemetery of al-Baqi in Madina.

### **Imam Husayn and the Tragedy of Karbala**

Hasan designated his brother Husayn to succeed him and Husayn too lived in Madina and observed his late brother's agreement to keep out of politics as long as the Caliph Mu'awiya lived. A crisis was bound to follow when Mu'awiya named his son Yazid to succeed him as Caliph. Yazid was notorious for his immoral life and failure to observe the most basic commands of the Qur'an. After taking over as Caliph on the death of his father in 680, Yazid decided to demand an oath of allegiance from the people individually. Imam Husayn could not possibly give such an oath to him. It would be openly to support a tyrant and fail completely to give the appropriate leadership to the community. In order to avoid an open clash with the agents of Yazid, Husayn moved from Madina to Makka with his family and a group of close supporters in the hope that they would not come for him and cause trouble in the holy city.

Iraq had always been the power-base of the Shi'a and especially the city of Kufa, where Ali was killed. The difficulty was that the people of Kufa were fickle supporters and could not be trusted. The leaders of the community there wrote to Husayn to say that they needed him as their guide and asked him to come to live amongst them. There was the obvious question as to whether they could be trusted on this occasion. Husayn sent one of his trusted companions, Muslim ibn Aqil, to check out the situation in Kufa. Yazid heard what was happening and replaced the Governor of Kufa with his own man with orders to stamp out any support there for Husayn. Muslim ibn Aqil was killed and the people of Kufa pressurised into withdrawing their invitation to Husayn.

Husayn knew that his duty was to go to support the people of Kufa. He also heard that the agents of Yazid were going to come for him in Makka, but he did not want to see the holy city defiled with fighting. Husayn left Makka with his family and close supporters during the Hajj of 680 and set off in the direction of Kufa. Yazid's man in Kufa heard what had happened and sent a force of soldiers under the leadership of al-Hurr to shadow Husayn's party. They had been ordered not to let him turn back to Makka or to call at various settlements along the way. On one occasion, after several days of travelling, al-Hurr rode into Husayn's camp with his men. Such travel in the

desert is demanding and water is always a concern. Husayn noticed that the soldiers and their horses were in need of water so ordered that his water supply should be shared with them to quench their thirst. During the discussion between al-Hurr and Husayn, it came time for prayer and al-Hurr and his men lined up in one congregation with Husayn's party and prayed with Husayn acting as *imam*. Some days later, on the battlefield of Karbala, al-Hurr would leave the Umayyad army to ride to Husayn's side to beg his forgiveness for the part that he had played in bringing him to this situation. He was forgiven by Husayn and fought on his side in the battle, ultimately dying at the hands of his former comrades.

Al-Hurr had orders to prevent Husayn's party from reaching Kufa and to turn them towards Karbala. Husayn was given the chance to escape conflict by going off into the hills but he refused, preferring to do his duty. Some faithful people escaped from Kufa and came to join Husayn's party, which eventually numbered some seventy-two armed men plus women and children. They were forced to halt on the Plain of Karbala, where they were surrounded and cut off from the river from which they drew their water. The Umayyad army was numbered in thousands, so the odds were impossibly stacked against Husayn. The climax came when Husayn was given the demand that he must pledge allegiance to Yazid at Karbala before he would be allowed to leave. This he could not do. He foresaw that this would result in a battle and there would be great loss of life. He asked his companions to leave him and go to safety to save their lives. They refused, saying that they would prefer to stay and die with Husayn.

Orders reached the Umayyad army to say that they were to use force and attack and kill Husayn. As the time of battle drew near, valiant attempts were made by members of Husayn's party to break through to the river to bring back water for the children; one such was made by Husayn's half-brother, Abbas, who was butchered in the process. Husayn approached the Umayyads to ask for water for his six-months-old son Ali Asghar but the Umayyads killed the child with an arrow to the throat whilst he lay in his father's arms. Finally the order was given to attack and Husayn's men were killed in the onslaught. Husayn himself was the last to die after having been seriously wounded with swords and arrows. Eventually his head was cut off as a trophy and the bodies of the dead were desecrated by running the horses over them. The battle took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month of Muharram (10 October 680) and is remembered each year as Ashura Day.

The women and children were taken as captives first to Kufa, where they were humiliated and had to watch the severed head of Husayn ridiculed. The same happened when they were led as prisoners to the Umayyad court in Damascus. The group included another son of Husayn, Ali ibn Husayn (also known as Zayn al-Abidin), who had been designated by his father as the next Imam, and Zaynab, the sister of Husayn. Eventually they were allowed to leave Damascus and return to Madina, where the fourth Imam lived out the remainder of his life.

Imam Ali ibn Husayn is usually known by the name Zayn al-Abidin (“the embellishment of God’s servants”). He lived a quiet non-political life in Madina marked by piety and spiritual wisdom. He died in c.713 and designated his son, Muhammad al-Baqir as his successor, the fifth Imam. He also lived a non-political life in Madina and was noted for his wisdom, hence he was called Baqir al-Ilm (“the opener of knowledge”). The probable date of his death is c.733 and he designated his son, Ja'far al-Sadiq (“the upright one”) as his successor, the sixth Imam. Ja'far excelled in learning and was principally responsible for establishing the Shi'a code of living, called after him, the Ja'fari School of Shari'a. He too lived in Madina and, after his death in 765, was buried there alongside three of his predecessors (Hasan, Zayn al-Abidin and Muhammad al-Baqir) in the cemetery of al-Baqi.

After the death of Zayn al-Abidin, there was a division within the Shi'a community caused by a dispute about the rightful successor. The majority held that he had designated his son Muhammad as his successor but a minority group held that another son, Zayd ibn Ali, was the rightful fifth Imam. This minority group came to be called the Zaydis (or Fivers, as the dispute arose concerning the fifth Imam). Another dispute arose about who should be the seventh Imam. Ja'far apparently designated his second son Isma'il (d.755) as his successor but he died before his father. Ja'far's eldest son, Abdullah al-Aftah (d.766) died a few months after his father without leaving a male heir. There was a principle amongst the Shi'a that the Imamate did not pass between brothers except in the case of Hasan and Husayn. Those who believed that Ja'far had designated Isma'il held that the designation then passed to his son, Muhammad ibn Isma'il, as the rightful seventh Imam. They were a minority and are called the Isma'ilis (or Seveners). The majority did not believe in the apparent designation of Isma'il by his father but rather held that Ja'far had designated his third son, Musa al-Kazim, as the rightful seventh Imam.

Musa al-Kazim (“the reserved one”) lived in his birth city of Madina until the Caliph Haroun al-Rashid had him brought to Iraq where he could be kept under surveillance in Basra and Baghdad. He is alleged to have been poisoned by order of the Caliph and died in Baghdad in 799. He was buried in the cemetery there, which was to be called al-Kazimiyya until the death and burial there of the ninth Imam, from which time it was also called al-Kazimayn (“the two Kazims”); it remains to this day an important centre of pilgrimage. Musa al-Kazim designated his son Ali al-Rida (“the agreeable one”) as the eighth Imam. He was still living in Madina, where he remained until he was brought to Merv in eastern Iran by the Caliph Ma'mun in 816. He was probably killed on the Caliph's orders in 818 in Tus, where he was buried. The city was later re-named Mashhad (“the martyr's shrine”).

Ali al-Rida designated his young son Muhammad al-Taqi (“the God-conscious”) as the ninth Imam. He grew up in Baghdad but later was allowed to settle in Madina. Eventually he was brought back to Baghdad and died in the same year 835. He designated his son, Ali al-Naqi (also known as al-Hadi “the guide to what is right”), as the tenth Imam. He grew up in Madina but was brought to Iraq by the Caliph al-Mutawakkil in 848. He was required to live in the city of Samarra, where he died and

was buried in 868. He designated his son Hasan al-Askari (“the one forced to live in the army camp of Samarra”) as the eleventh Imam. He died in Samarra in 874 and was buried there; again Samarra became an important pilgrimage centre.

The importance of the sites associated with the burial of the Imams as pilgrimage centres should be noted. They have been treated with great respect by the Shi'a and remain important centres of pilgrimage until the present time. The same Caliph al-Mutawakkil, who brought Ali al-Hadi and Hasan al-Askari to Samarra, also ordered the destruction of the shrine of Imam Husayn at Karbala in 850; much to the annoyance of the Shi'a. Such centres of pilgrimage acted as focal points for Shi'a faith and identity and thus were feared by the rulers. A new shrine was built to Imam Husayn at Karbala in 977, where a domed mausoleum was erected. This dignified way of marking the burial sites of the Imams became a standard practice and in later centuries such a shrine was built to the second, fourth, fifth and sixth Imams in the cemetery of al-Baqi in Madina, which was destroyed in 1925.

### **The Twelfth Imam, Imam al-Mahdi**

Hasan al-Askari feared that his young son Muhammad al-Qa'im, the designated twelfth Imam, would be harmed by the Caliph and so he was kept in hiding in Samarra so that few knew of his existence. He was present for the funeral of his father and then disappeared from the sight of people. Some reported that he entered a well beneath a mosque in Samarra. In this way he entered his hidden existence as the Hidden Imam. He was never seen by the masses again. There was a series of four men who were appointed by him as his trustees (*wakil*) or mediators (*safir*). They were in contact with the Hidden Imam and were able to take petitions to him and receive his answers in guidance. This time was known as the Lesser Occultation. This continued until the death of the last of these trustees, Abu'l-Husayn Ali ibn Muhammad al-Simmari, in 941. The Imam had ordered him not to appoint any successor as he was severing contact with the world from this time onwards. This Greater Occultation, as it was called, continues to the present day.

We should recall the Hadith of Muhammad that he would leave after him two precious things, the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt, who would never separate and act as guidance to the world until the Day of Judgement. The world cannot be left without the presence of an Imam as guide to humankind and so the Hidden Imam, during the period of the Greater Occultation, is understood to be present on earth but hidden from human sight. He is thus spoken of as the Imam of the Present Age. He is out of human contact and all guidance of the Shi'a community in his absence is based on the premise that the community should be guided along the lines established by the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt so that it is found to be on the correct path when he returns.

There was a Hadith of the Prophet in which he spoke of his community being guided by twelve righteous successors after his death. Muhammad was possessed of knowledge revealed to him by God, therefore he could see certain things that would happen in the future. The symbolism of the number twelve is significant for the Shi'a

as it reminds them of the twelve tribes of Israel who succeeded Moses, and the twelve apostles of Jesus, who succeeded him. On this basis, this majority school amongst the Shi'a are called the Ithna' Ashari (or Twelvers).

The twelfth Imam will one day come out of occultation and take his rightful place as leader of humankind. This is made clear by some of his titles: al-Muntazar (“the awaited one”), al-Mahdi (“the rightly guided one”) and al-Qa'im (“the one who arises”). His return is eagerly awaited, longed for and prayed for by Ithna' Ashari Shi'a to this day. When he returns, he will fill the earth with justice and rule humanity in peace according to the guidance of the Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt. He is expected to reappear in Makka between the Ka'ba and the Stone of Abraham but the year is unknown. He will then be hand-in-hand with Jesus, who will also return as the Messiah (in Arabic *al-masih* “the purified one”). The earth will be cleansed from impurities and unbelievers will repent or be killed. A time of correct belief and justice will come upon the earth as foretold by the Qur'an [Q. 24:55]. The earth will take on something of the character of paradise, in which there will be no more poverty, hunger or want. This will continue for an unknown period of time leading up to the Day of Judgement.