

The Study of Shi'i Islam

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Writing and Resistance: The Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Early Shi'ism

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One of the subtler issues that distinguished Shi'is from most non-Shi'is in early Islam was their view on the written transmission of religious knowledge. The dominant intellectual culture in early Islam valued the oral transmission of religious teachings. While Gregor Schoeler and others have shown that there is strong evidence of fairly widespread use of private written notes among early scholars, oral transmission remained the ideal, and reliance on written notes was disparaged and rarely admitted. Yet a number of scholars have shown that this attitude towards written transmission was far less prevalent among those outside the dominant Islamic intellectual tradition, and carried little resonance with Shi'is and Kharijīs among others. In fact, far from exhibiting any ambivalence about transmitting religious knowledge in writing, the Imāmi *ḥadīth* tradition seemed to encourage the practice. Yet the existing scholarship on writing in the early Islamic tradition does not sufficiently address the significance of Shi'i divergence on this point, and most scholars researching oral and written transmission in early Islam mention Shi'i differences on this issue merely as an aside. The early, written heritage of Shi'ism has been well documented by Shi'i and Western scholars alike, but in this chapter I hope to bring out the deeper significance of the early Shi'i use of writing and written texts. I argue that the Imāmi Shi'i attitude towards writing is not a minor technical detail, but is, rather, profoundly connected to uniquely Shi'i conceptions of religious authority and community, as well as to certain esoteric conceptions of knowledge. It was, on one level, driven by the imperatives of secrecy and survival among *ghayba* Shi'is, but on another, it constituted a subtle mode of Shi'i resistance to the dominant intellectual culture of early Islam that both facilitated and demonstrated Shi'ism's divergence from the mainstream Muslim religious perspective.

Oral and Written Transmission of Knowledge in Early Islam

While studies have long confirmed that the Middle East of the early Islamic period was hardly as illiterate as is sometimes thought – there is substantial evidence of written contracts, letters and political documents,¹ for example – it nonetheless seems to be true that the transmission of specifically religious knowledge, or historical knowledge related to the religio-political situation of the early Islamic community, is widely thought to have been of a predominantly oral nature, with written compilations of religious or historical material emerging in substantial number only some time in the 3rd/9th century.

Nabia Abbott issued an important initial challenge to the notion that the transmission of such knowledge was either as primitive or as exclusively oral as may have been thought through her early, voluminous and detailed work on the early Arabic papyri. She further argued, on the basis of an admittedly credulous reading of early sources, that historical writing, as such, was fairly well developed by the end of the first Islamic century.² She further argued that the apparent antipathy towards the written transmission of religious knowledge was derived, not from an instinctive distrust of the written word or excessive pride in memory and oral recitation on the part of the Arabs, as is sometimes conjectured, but rather from a direct prohibition on the written preservation of this kind of knowledge established by the second caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khattāb. According to a report found in an important early Islamic source, 'Umar collected and burned all written Prophetic traditions and records of this sort during his caliphate, fearing that they would confuse Muslims and detract from the absolute authority and sacred character of the Qur'an.³ Juyrboll later sought to temper Abbott's enthusiastic argument for the early prevalence of written history and tradition, taking her to task for an excessive and largely uncritical reliance on *isnād* evidence, and for what Juyrboll argued was an over-emphasis on 'Umar's role in inhibiting the written transmission of religious knowledge, citing her heavy reliance on the Islamic sources' own explanation of this role.⁴ Yet, in a more recent study, Michael Cook similarly cited the tradition regarding 'Umar's role in the discouragement or outright prohibition of the writing of religious knowledge, in conjunction with 'Umar's reportedly unflattering comparison of the development of such a body of written, non-scriptural religious material to the written Mishna in Judaism.⁵

Whether or not the imposition of a strictly oral transmission of religious and historical tradition can be correctly or justly laid at the feet of the second caliph, the attribution of a prohibition on written transmission to such a figure as 'Umar b. al-Khattāb (d. 23/644) is hardly insignificant for the association between the oral transmission of religious knowledge and religious 'orthodoxy'. In her study, Abbott observed that it was those who represented 'pious scholarship' who 'struggled to hold onto the idea of the absolute primacy of oral transmission';⁶ that the restriction on written *ḥadīth* collections 'did have the effect of discouraging the writing-down of *ḥadīth* among the more orthodox and pious, but it had little effect on the heterodox Kharijites and the less submissive of 'Umar's own generation and later generations among the faithful';⁷ and that during the time of 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz ('Umar II), it was the 'pious scholars' who began, reluctantly, to write down their materials and traditions in order to 'forestall encroaching heresy',⁸ perhaps in order to compete with less 'orthodox' groups who had no qualms about committing their material to writing. Abbott's statements seem to beg the question of just who constituted this unspecified group of 'pious scholars'; but her statements nonetheless suggest that some kind of general or at least symbolic connection between writing and heterodoxy or writing and resistance to the established Islamic intellectual tradition was fairly widespread in the earliest period of Islamic sectarian history.

Abbott mentions only the Kharijites specifically as a group who rejected, or at least seemed to ignore, the second caliph's alleged prohibition on the writing of religious knowledge. But if the Kharijites, who accepted the caliphate and personal piety of 'Umar, would take his prohibition so lightly, then what could such a prohibition have meant to Shi'is, who conceived of 'Umar as the primary perpetrator of the historic injustice to the family of the Prophet? Indeed, Michael Cook observes an almost complete absence of any trace of the oral versus written controversy in either Khariji or Shi'i sources.⁹ But beyond a mere absence of any notable controversy about written tradition in Shi'i sources, one might expect to find 'Umar's alleged prohibition on the writing of Prophetic tradition roundly condemned in Shi'i sources, and presented in Shi'i polemic as nothing short of an attempt to hide from the judgement of history evidence of the injustice and illegitimacy of his and his predecessor, Abū Bakr's, caliphates, and of the religious innovations which Shi'is accuse them of sanctioning under their rule.

¹ See, for instance, R. B. Serjeant, 'Early Arabic Prose Literature', in *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 114–153.

² N. Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri* (Chicago, 1957), vol. 2, p. 39.

³ Ibn Sa'd, *al-Tabaqāt al-kubrā* (Biographien Muhammads, 9 vols. (Leiden, 1905–1940), vol. 5, p. 140.

⁴ G. H. A. Juyrboll, *Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 5.

⁵ See M. Cook, 'The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam', *Arabica*, 44 (1997), pp. 437–523, especially pp. 502–503, 509.

⁶ Abbott, *Studies*, vol. 1, p. 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, *Studies*, vol. 2, p. 52.

⁹ See Cook, 'The Opponents', p. 444, where he notes: 'I have encountered almost nothing of relevance in non-Sunni sources. The oralism of the old Kufan traditionists appears to have left no trace among the Imāms or the Zaydis, just as that of the Basran traditionists seems scarcely to be reflected in Ibadī [Kharijī] literature.' See also p. 483, where he observes: 'It is in general the role of the 'Alids to appear on the side of writing (a fact that is doubtless linked to the absence of evidence for the controversy [over writing] in Shi'i sources).'

Yet Shi'i tradition does not seem to have directly addressed 'Umar's alleged ban on writing *ḥadīth*, at least not directly in relation to its own views on the written transmission of religious knowledge. The fact that they do not, against all expectation, would seem to call into question the authenticity, or at least the early circulation, of 'Umar's reported ban on writing religious knowledge, for this seems to be something that would have hardly gone without early Shi'i comment and criticism. There is little doubt, however, that to the extent that any kind of official taboo on the written transmission of religious or historical knowledge actually existed, Shi'i is largely ignored it. Such a conclusion can be derived not only from the lack of controversy over the issue in Shi'i sources, but also from the fact that there is a significant representation of extant Shi'i works among the earliest that we have in a variety of literary genres, including history,¹⁰ *ḥadīth*,¹¹ heresiography¹² and poetry,¹³ and their disproportionate survival likely has much to do with their having been recorded in writing somewhat earlier than many of their Sunni counterparts.

While the written text is easily susceptible to later tampering, in Shi'i texts, such corruptions often meant either that new material was superadded to the core of the early text,¹⁴ or else that controversial material was omitted.¹⁵ In many cases, what is likely to have been the core text can still be discerned. Written texts could also be easily destroyed, of course, but to the extent that they physically survived, they may have been harder to ignore, and so to allow to be forgotten, or to substantially alter, than was the case for purely orally transmitted material.¹⁶ For example, a significant number of Shi'i works written in the 2nd–3rd/8th–9th centuries are still extant as independent texts, despite their being incorporated into later compilations. Perhaps

because some of these early source materials were committed to writing while Shi'i theology and Imamology was still under construction, we find in Shi'i *ḥadīth* collections sections where traditions containing older formulations and terminologies have been placed side by side with newer ones, in some cases suggesting a clear line of development.¹⁷ Similarly, the Shi'i heresiographical work, *Firaq al-shi'a*, which was composed during the *al-ghayba al-sughra* (the lesser occultation), contains statements regarding the Twelfth Imam that effectively contradict later Shi'i theology regarding his return.¹⁸ As yet another example of the stubbornness of written material, we might note that despite the attempts of Imāmi Shi'i scholarly authorities in the 4th/10th century to encourage the acceptance of the 'Uthmāni codex of the Qur'anic text, they did not manage to erase from the record the substantial material that already existed in Imāmi Shi'i *ḥadīth* literature detailing Shi'i differences with the 'Uthmāni text.¹⁹ In what follows, I examine the significance of writing and written documents for the early Shi'i attempt to construct an historical counter-narrative of defining events in the early Islamic community, as well as for Shi'i's slightly later project of preserving and disseminating the teachings of the Imams within their community.

Writing and the Shi'i Counter-narrative of the Early Caliphate

By the time scholars generally agree that Islamic historical tradition had developed into a primarily written one (between the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th century), a more or less unanimous understanding of the events surrounding the rise of Islam and the early caliphate had emerged. The essential justness and legitimacy of the early caliphate was widely accepted, and dissenting opinions had largely been pushed to the margins.²⁰ But the well-known Shi'i view of the events which took place from the death of the Prophet to the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate differs significantly from the version of these same events as found in the standard, extant historical compilations, all of which were composed in the Abbasid period. The era of the Madīnan or Rightly Guided caliphate, as it is termed in the official Sunni tradition established in the early Abbasid period, represents for the Shi'is, by contrast, the source and root of much injustice and religious error in the Islamic community.

¹⁰ For example, Nasr b. Muzāhim's *Waq'at Siffin*, which dates to the second half of the 2nd century, Ibn Muzāhim having died in 183, to say nothing of the partially extant historical compilations of early Shi'i scholars, most notably, Abū Mikhnaf, whose work was substantially incorporated in the works of Tabarī and other later compilers.

¹¹ In this category, we have a number of extant *usūl*, or informal Shi'i notebooks of *ḥadīth* traditions from the Imams al-Bāqir and al-Sādiq, which date from the early and mid-2nd/8th century.

¹² In this genre, there are the two 3rd/9th-century extant Shi'i heresiographical works al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī's *Firaq al-shi'a* and Sa'd b. 'Abd Allāh al-Ash'arī al-Qunmī's *Kitāb maqālāt wa-l-firaq*, which predate the earliest known non-Shi'i heresiography, that of Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, by a generation.

¹³ The *Ḥashimīyat* of Kumayr b. Zayd, for example, almost certainly dates to the late Umayyad period.

¹⁴ With regard to this phenomenon in the early work, *Kitāb Sulaym b. Qays*, discussed below, see Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival* (Oxford, 2003), p. 86.

¹⁵ This has been shown to be the case with the extant recension of the *Tafsīr al-Qunmī*, see Meir Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmi Shi'ism* (Leiden, 1999), pp. 46–50.

¹⁶ Note Gregor Schoeler's discussion in *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aurai to the Read*, tr. S. Toorawa (Edinburgh, 2009), ch. 2, where he observes that in early traditions of Arabic poetry, wherein oral transmission was both traditional and inherent to the genre, transmitters seem to have been expected not simply to transmit the poems verbatim, but to improve them where appropriate.

¹⁷ See, for example, my discussion of this phenomenon in relation to Shi'i traditions regarding the pillars of religion in *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany, NY, 2007).

¹⁸ See Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shi'a* (Cairo, 1992), p. 100.

¹⁹ See al-Kulaynī, *Usūl al-kāfi*, ed. Muḥammad Ja'far Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 479–506. For the most recent treatment of Imāmi views on the Qur'an, see Eran Kohlberg and M. A. Amir-Moerzi, *Revelation and Falsification: The Kitāb al-qir'āt of Ahmad b. Muḥammad al-Sayyārī* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 24–30.

²⁰ See W. Madelung, *The Succession to Muḥammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1997), for an examination of early dissenting opinions.

The work of Eitan Kohlberg has made it clear, and it is now widely accepted, that the definitive establishment of this radically negative Shi'i view of the early caliphate and of the Prophetic Companions who supported it can be traced to some time in the early (pre-Abbasid) 2nd/8th Islamic century.²¹ This is precisely the period in which a standard version of history and tradition was beginning to be written down – most famously by the historian allegedly in the service of the Umayyad court, Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 124/741) – with official sanction, if not direct encouragement.²² Although little remains to us of this 'Umayyad version of history', it is to be expected that in this version, the first three caliphs would have been presented as impeccable examples of Muslim leadership and Umayyad legitimacy would have been set on firm ground. If such a project can in fact be traced to the late Umayyad period (or early 2nd/8th century), then it seems reasonable to think that the more radical strain of Rafīdī Shi'ism emerging at this same time would have felt the need to present an internally consistent and morally compelling counter-version of the history of the early caliphate. From another point of view, the emergence of the more radical Rafīdī Shi'i perspective in the late Umayyad period may itself have been part of a strenuous Shi'i reaction to the development and recording of an 'official' version of history and tradition in this same period. It is worth noting that al-Zuhri was a Madinan scholar who was a contemporary and associate of fellow Madinans, 'Alī Zayn al-'Abidin and Muhammad al-Baqir, and that 'Alī Zayn al-'Abidin reportedly knew and disapproved of al-Zuhri's collaboration with the Umayyads. It may not be a coincidence, therefore, that the earliest attempts at combining the Shi'i perspective on early Islamic history with the beginnings of an internally consistent sectarian theological doctrine, and earliest extant works attesting to this, can be traced to the time of Muhammad al-Baqir, around the turn of the first Islamic century.

Writing, Secrecy and Counter-history in *Kitāb Sulaym b. Qays*

If we look at the contested history of the events surrounding the establishment of the caliphate after the death of the Prophet, we see that writing and written documents play some role in both Shi'i and Sunni accounts of these events, and have particular relevance for some of the traditional Shi'i grievances against the two caliphs. One of the most commonly known examples of this is the reported request of the Prophet on his deathbed for a pen and tablet in order to write his last will and testament, which

²¹ See Eitan Kohlberg, 'Some Imāmi Shi'i Views on the Saḥāba', *JAOS*, 5 (1984), pp. 146–147, where he notes the presence of these ideas among the earlier Sabā'iyyah or Kaysaniyya Shi'is, but states that the first Imāmi Shi'i Imam to whom these ideas are attributed is Muḥammad al-Baqir.

²² Abbott, *Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 33–34; Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam*, pp. 50–56. See also allusions to al-Zuhri's association both with the Umayyads and with the change from a predominantly oral to a predominantly written transmission methodology in Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqāt*, vol. 2, pp. 135–136.

Shi'is believe included, or would have included, a clear and explicit designation of 'Alī b. Abī Tālib as the Prophet's successor. It is none other than 'Umar who reportedly prevented compliance with the Prophet's request, arguing that the Prophet was delirious and not mentally fit to give such a final testament.²³ A second, equally well-known instance which relates more directly to the transmission of religious knowledge, is the reported rejection by Abū Bakr of 'Alī's written codex of the Qur'an, with accompanying Prophetic commentary, compiled in the months after the Prophet's death.²⁴ This, of course, constitutes an important basis of the Shi'i claim that their Imams alone know the complete Qur'an, and that they alone are in possession of its true interpretation.

One of the most important early works suggesting a link between the conscious effort to establish or preserve a Shi'i counter-narrative of the early events of the Islamic community and the role of writing in both the events themselves and their transmission, is the late Umayyad Shi'i polemical work, *Kitāb Sulaym b. Qays al-Hilālī*. This work presents itself as a collection of traditions, or *ahādīth*, that the purported author, Sulaym b. Qays al-Hilālī, heard directly from 'Alī b. Abī Tālib or from his well-known contemporary supporters, and then recorded in a single written text. Other than this work, there is no historical record of Sulaym b. Qays, and the name is either a completely fictitious ascription, or else a pseudonym.²⁵ According to the transmission history that the text provides for itself, Sulaym b. Qays, on his deathbed, gave the book to the known, but reportedly unreliable Shi'i transmitter, Abān b. Abī 'Ayyāsh,²⁶ without having orally reviewed with him all of the contents of the book. Abān later conveyed the book to the generally reliable transmitter, 'Umar b. Udhaynah, who is also the primary source through which far more well-accepted collections of traditions from Muḥammad al-Baqir enter Shi'i *hadīth* literature.²⁷ Given the nature of its reported transmission history, *Kitāb Sulaym* is sometimes classified by

²³ See al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al. (Leiden, 1879–1901), vol. 2, pp. 1806–1807, in which 'Umar is not named specifically as the one who refuses the Prophet's request; and Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqāt*, vol. 2, pp. 36–38, where 'Umar is specifically identified as the one who refuses the Prophet's request in certain accounts cited by Ibn Sa'd, but not in others.

²⁴ Al-Ṭabrisī, *al-Ihtijāj*, ed. Ja'far Subḥānī (Qumm, 1992), p. 207. See also, Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqāt*, vol. 2, p. 101, where 'Alī's collection of the Qur'an after the death of the Prophet is noted, without reference to Abū Bakr's rejection of it.

²⁵ See Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, p. 83; and Ardabili, *Imānī al-ruwāḥ wa izāhat al-shīḥahāt 'an al-turūq wa'l-isnād* (Beirut, 1983), vol. 1, p. 374.

²⁶ Abān's reputation as an unreliable transmitter stems directly from accusations that he forged the *Kitāb Sulaym b. Qays*, which is the only major transmission he is credited with in Shi'i bio-bibliographical sources, see Ardabili, *Imānī al-ruwāḥ*, vol. 1, p. 9; and Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Iktihār ma'rifat al-rijāl* (= *Rijāl al-Kashsh*), ed. Ḥasan al-Muṣṭafawī (Mashhad, 1348 Sh./1969), pp. 104–105, where all that is known about Sulaym comes from the text of this work itself.

²⁷ See Ardabili, *Imānī al-ruwāḥ*, vol. 1, pp. 631–632.

Imānī Shi'i scholars as one of the 'usūl' or 'notebooks',²⁸ although it differs significantly in style from the other extant *usūl* or from other Shi'i collections of traditions. Firstly, the traditions included in the text are not generally limited to a single issue of theology or *fiqh*; rather, they tend to be lengthy traditions that include full, narrative accounts of some of the most important events in early Islamic history, as told from a distinctly Shi'i point of view. While the book's contents are clearly polemical, its concern with historical events and the long, narrative style of its reports distinguish it from other Shi'i works of *ḥadīth*. This text has often been dismissed as an unreliable source by Shi'i and Western scholars alike because it bears the clear marks of later tampering and corruption.²⁹ But compelling internal evidence indicates that the core of the text is distinctly late Umayyad in origin, and can almost certainly be dated between AH 122 and 132.³⁰

The book is primarily concerned with presenting an historical case for the superiority of 'Alī and for the injustice that he suffered in being denied his right to the caliphate, while explaining the religious error and underhanded political manipulations of the first two caliphs, as well as of the third caliph, 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, and a host of anti-Shi'i figures: Zubayr b. al-'Awāmm, Talha b. 'Ubayd, 'Ā'isha bt. Abi Bakr, 'Amr b. al-'Ās and Mu'āwiyā b. Abi Sufyān – that is to say, precisely those prominent opponents of the 'Alid cause whom the emerging Rāfiḍī Shi'i doctrine of the early 2nd/8th century encouraged Shi'is to dissociate from and to curse.³¹ Given its early dating and its historical, if polemical, content, *Kitāb Sulaym* likely represents an early attempt at compiling a pro-'Alid version of the events of the early Islamic community – a version that may have been engendered, or at least radicalised, by the reported Umayyad attempt to record a written, official history in roughly this same time period in the early 2nd/8th century.

Turning to the content of *Kitāb Sulaym*, we see that one of the earliest historical events given broad coverage in the text is the Prophetic statement at Ghadir Khumm. There are three complete accounts of this event included in the text, along with numerous references to it in other passages.³² I have argued elsewhere that evidence in both Sunni and Shi'i sources suggests that the Ghadir Khumm tradition was in

²⁸ Eian Kohlberg, 'al-'Uṣūl al-arba'ūniyya', in Harald Motzki, *Ḥadīth: Origins and Development* (Ashgate, 2004), p. 128.

²⁹ For some of the range of opinion on the book, see Tustarī, *Qāmūs al-rīyāl*, vol. 4, pp. 445–455; Ardabili, vol. 1, p. 374. The leading Shi'i criticism of the text is undoubtedly found in Ibn al-Chadā'ir, *Kitāb al-dū'qā*. See Tustarī's summary of Ibn al-Chadā'ir's multiple reasons for discrediting the text in *Qāmūs*, vol. 4, pp. 450–453. For a more recent discussion of the various historical opinions among Shi'i scholars regarding *Kitāb Sulaym*, see Muḥammad Taqī Subḥānī, 'Dar shīnā'at wa ityā'āt-yi *Kitāb Sulaym* b. Qays al-Hilālī', *Āyina-i pazūhish*, 37, pp. 19–28, esp. 21–24.

³⁰ See Maria Dakake, 'Loyalty, Love, and Faith: Shi'i Identity in Early Islam' (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 2000), Appendix I, and Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, p. 83.

³¹ See Eian Kohlberg, 'Barā'a in Shi'i Doctrine', *JSAL*, 7 (1986), pp. 139–175.

³² *Kitāb Sulaym*, vol. 2, pp. 644–646, 758–759, 828–829.

fairly wide circulation in the late Umayyad period.³³ It seems reasonable, therefore, that this event would constitute an essential pillar of any purported Shi'i counter-historical narrative originating at this time. The other major incident that is given detailed coverage in the text is the night of the *Sajjā Bani Sā'idā* and its aftermath. *Kitāb Sulaym* presents essentially two complete accounts of this event, one of which (constituted by combining *ḥadīths* 3 and 48 in the text) presents a strongly pro-'Abbasid version of the events of that night, with both Ibn 'Abbās and his father being important protagonists in the narrative,³⁴ and a second in which the Abbasid figures are absent.³⁵ It is the second version of the nomination of Abū Bakr which sounds most like the version found in other, later Shi'i sources, and it is this account that is partially quoted by al-Kulaynī³⁶ and later Shi'i *ḥadīth* compilers³⁷ on the authority of *Kitāb Sulaym*, whereas the first account, with its favourable representation of the Abbasid Hashemites, is not cited by any later Shi'i author that we have seen. It may well be that the first account represents the original version of these events, belonging to the earliest recension of *Kitāb Sulaym*, while the second represents a later account inserted into the text in the Abbasid era, when the Shi'is were embroiled in a legitimist debate with the collateral Abbasid Hashemite line. The text also includes narrative accounts of other incidents which have become well-known elements of the Shi'i argument against the Sunni view of the early caliphs and Prophetic Companions, including a discussion of the issue of Padak as part of Fatima's inheritance appropriated by the state under Abū Bakr, as well as a list of 'harmful innovations' enacted or sanctioned under the leadership of the first two caliphs.³⁸ The text also includes several narrative accounts in which 'Alī defends his own legitimist claims and explains certain puzzling aspects of his historical behaviour.

Perhaps more important than the historical narratives *Kitāb Sulaym* claims to transmit, at least for our purposes here, is the role that writing plays in many of the book's accounts, including the exclusively written transmission history it provides for itself. Throughout the text, writing is connected with secret or hidden knowledge that is, above all, subversive in nature, and this is certainly the case with its transmission narrative as well. In this lengthy narrative, the secondary transmitter, Abān b. Abi 'Ayyāsh, admits that he was disturbed by the allegations made in the book he received from Sulaym, and so set out to confirm its contents, discreetly, with several key pro-'Alid figures, from the fourth Imam, 'Alī Zayn al-'Abidin, to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and Abū Tufayl 'Amīr b. Wāṭila (d. 100/718). All three corroborate the truth of its contents, indicating that they maintained a quiet awareness of the true nature of these disturbing events, as recounted in *Kitāb Sulaym*, despite their acquiescence to the existing state of affairs. Abū Tufayl reportedly initiates Abān into

³³ See Dakake, *The Charismatic Community*, ch. 2.

³⁴ *Kitāb Sulaym*, vol. 2, pp. 571–576 and 862–873.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 578–599.

³⁶ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, ed. 'Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Tehran, 1983), vol. 8, pp. 343–344.

³⁷ Al-Tabrizī, *al-Iḥyā'ī*, vol. 1, pp. 203–222.

³⁸ *Kitāb Sulaym*, vol. 2, pp. 675–695.

the esoteric Shi'i belief in *ra'y*³⁹, while also warning him that such esoteric knowledge can be dangerous, and that it must be concealed, even from most Shi'is.⁴⁰ The clear implication is that this book that Abān has shown him must remain secret as well, and the text's secret nature and its written transmission are clearly linked. Writing would likely have been strongly connected with esoteric and highly secretive knowledge at this time. The practical difficulty of reproducing a written text meant that few could have access to knowledge transmitted in this way. In fact, the indication in early Islamic sources seems to be that such written materials were used almost exclusively for the private purposes of an individual scholar, not as a medium for transmitting religious knowledge, or that if they were transmitted, they were transmitted as part of a family legacy.⁴¹ As Schoeler makes clear in his work, while written texts were used for private purposes, all publication was oral/aural.⁴² However, Sulaym commits these particular traditions to writing – the transmission narrative implicitly argues – not only because this was the most effective means of preserving the knowledge, but also for the purpose of safely transmitting it, intact, from one generation of elite Shi'is to another.

The importance of the written word in the transmission of secretive knowledge is also well attested in the content, as well as the alleged transmission methodology, of *Kitāb Sulaym*. The text, for example, includes a narration of the Prophet's attempt to compose a final written testament and 'Umar's prevention of it.⁴³ In another passage, Ibn 'Abbās claims that 'Alī showed him a book in his possession that contained a list of all those who would be saved and all those who would be damned in the Hereafter.⁴⁴ Another interesting example of the usefulness of written records is suggested in the passage in which Sulaym claims to give a first-hand account of the secret, treacherous dealings between the Umayyad caliph, Mu'āwīya, and his repressive governor in Iraq, Ziyād b. Abihī. Sulaym informs us that he has been able to give the account – which takes the form of a letter written by Mu'āwīya to Ziyād – because he has a friend (who is secretly a fellow Shi'i) in the service of Ziyād. This friend, he tells us, surreptitiously took the letter and read it to Sulaym, who immediately committed its contents to writing. Sulaym then reports that Ziyād later asked the servant to retrieve the letter, whereupon Ziyād erased the letter and ordered the servant to refrain from

revealing its contents to anyone. Sulaym then adds, with some palpable satisfaction: 'But [Ziyād] did not know that I had already copied it.'⁴⁵

In contrast to the 'true' narrative of the early Islamic community, which was concealed and maintained in writing, the text indicates the falsity of anti-'Alid material transmitted orally and promoted publicly, mentioning specifically Mu'āwīya's pervasive attempts at spreading false praise traditions regarding 'Uthmān.⁴⁶ However, the text also accuses 'Alid enemies of using written documents to keep secret records of their own subversive plans. The clearest and most interesting examples of this in the text are the numerous references to the '*aṣḥāb al-sahifa*' – a group of anti-'Alid figures, including Abū Bakr and 'Umar, who according to several accounts in *Kitāb Sulaym*, secretly recorded a pact amongst themselves to seek to usurp 'Alī's legitimate authority upon the death of the Prophet.⁴⁷ The secret anti-'Alid document is allegedly written towards the end of the Prophet's lifetime, and in one account, the document is drawn up subsequent to the Prophet's announcement at Ghadir Khumm (just weeks before the Prophet's death).⁴⁸ The text thus alleges that this group planned during the Prophet's own lifetime to directly subvert the latter's command regarding the authority of 'Alī, and that they recorded their commitment to this intended subversion in a written document that was then concealed in the Ka'ba until after the Prophet's death.⁴⁹ Here, then, we have a connection established between writing and subversion from both sides of the coin: the '*aṣḥāb al-sahifa*' write a document with the intent of subverting the legitimate transfer of authority from the Prophet to 'Alī; while it is implied that Sulaym in turn compiles his 'counter-history' in order to subvert the consolidation of this initial subversion, with the hope of some day re-establishing just and legitimate authority over the community in the manner he and his fellow Shi'is believe was ordained by the Prophet.

Shi'i Accounts of the First Civil War

While the narratives in *Kitāb Sulaym* focus primarily on events surrounding, and immediately after, the Prophet's death, the text does provide some details regarding the various events of the First Civil War, such as the Battle of the Camel⁵⁰ and the

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 557–564.

⁴⁰ See Cook, 'The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam', pp. 476–479.

⁴¹ Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam*, pp. 40–45.

⁴² *Kitāb Sulaym*, vol. 2, pp. 794–795. This account is related by Ibn 'Abbās, as is the version found in al-Tabarī (see note 26). In al-Tabarī's account, 'Umar is not mentioned by name as the one who refuses the Prophet's request. Rather this is attributed to some unnamed persons present in the room with the Prophet, and the account further alludes to the fact that Ibn 'Abbās did not generally relate the matter openly. In the *Kitāb Sulaym* version, Ibn 'Abbās likewise initially refuses to give the name of 'Umar as the culprit, only telling this later in confidence to Sulaym.

⁴³ *Kitāb Sulaym*, vol. 2, p. 804. For similar traditions, see al-Ḥafār al-Qunmī, *Baḥār al-darajāt* (Beirut, 2007), vol. 1, pp. 379–383.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 739–746.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 785–786.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 727, where the list of those party to this secret pact also includes, besides Abū Bakr and 'Umar, Abū 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrah, Salīm (the client of Abū Hindhayfa) and Mu'ādh b. Jabal.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 730–731. In this account, those party to the pact include, in addition to the five cited in the previous reference, five members of the *shura* ('Uthmān, Talha, Zubayr, 'Abd al-Rahmān b. 'Awf, Sa'd b. Abi Waqqās, as well as 'Amr b. al-'Ās and Mu'āwīya b. Abi Sufyan).

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 727; a similar tradition is included in Abū Sa'īd 'Abbad, *Asl in Usul sīhat ash-shar* (Tehran, 1951–1952), p. 18.

⁴⁹ See *Kitāb Sulaym*, vol. 2, pp. 796–800.

Battle of Siffin,⁵⁰ and the text is also concerned with the immediate aftermath of the Umayyad takeover after 'Alī's death.⁵¹ It is remarkable, however, that the text does not deal in any detail with the massacre of Husayn and his supporters at Karbalā', even though the purported author of the text, Sulaym b. Qays, reportedly lived through the time of Hasan and Husayn b. 'Alī, dying well after the Karbalā' event. As central as the Karbalā' event would become in later Shi'i consciousness, the event plays almost no role in the sectarian polemic of the text. It is mentioned in passing only a few times, and in each of these instances it is merely included in long lists of other Umayyad injustices.⁵² There are several reasons we might hypothesise for this striking lacuna, one of which may be that the Karbalā' event was not a serious point of contention among early Islamic historians. In fact, the historiographical tradition regarding the Karbalā' incident is almost entirely unanimous as regards the justice and goodness of Husayn, his supporters and his cause, and the evil and maliciousness of the perpetrators of the massacre. There was, perhaps, no need to present a polemically magnified counter-version of this historical event, since Shi'is and non-Shi'is, radicals and moderates alike, seem to have viewed the event with the same categorical judgement. The text of *Kitāb Sulaym* is primarily interested in addressing the more controversial aspects of the events surrounding the establishment of the caliphate, presenting its Rāfiḍī Shi'i view as a challenge, perhaps, to the emerging historiography which was reportedly being sanctioned or even commissioned by Umayyad rulers such as Hishām b. 'Abd al-Malik (d. 125/743), on the one hand, and to the moderate Shi'i perspective against which it was historically defining itself in this same period, on the other.

The events of the First Civil War, however, remained more contested, and in fact seem to have been a matter of particular concern to Shi'i authors in this early period. Gregor Schoeler notes that the earliest written monographs about the events of the First Civil War were composed exclusively by Shi'i authors.⁵³ It was Shi'is who initially took it upon themselves to record this history, and in so doing, likely preserved much of it from official obfuscation, while also effectively framing the historical narrative of the First Civil War in a way that would influence all later historiography of this period. The importance of the early Shi'i narratives of this event are clear, for example, in the extent to which the Shi'i Abū Mikhnaf's (d. 157/774) account is wholly imported into Tabarī's narrative of both the First Civil War and the Karbalā' massacre, with

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 805–813.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 782–785.

⁵² Ibid., p. 632, where the broken *bay'a* of the Kufans toward Husayn is likened to the broken *bay'a* of Zubayr and Talha toward 'Alī and the broken *bay'a* of the Kufans toward Hasan b. 'Alī upon his father's death; and pp. 633 and 838, where it is mentioned but greatly overshadowed by the issue of the general Umayyad oppression of the Shi'is. On pp. 774–775, Husayn's martyrdom is mentioned along with that of 'Alī, Hasan b. 'Alī and Zayd b. 'Alī, although, again, no details are given of the event and the notion of his martyrdom is not even connected with the site of Karbalā'.

⁵³ Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam*, p. 74.

approximately 85–90 per cent of al-Tabarī's account of these two events having been taken directly from Abū Mikhnaf's works. There are also written accounts of the individual battles of the First Civil War ascribed to late Umayyad Shi'i authors who were disciples of Muḥammad al-Baqir, including the prominent jābir b. Yazid al-Ju'fī and Abān b. Taghlib;⁵⁴ and the earliest, fully extant account of the Battle of Siffin (*Waq'at Siffin*) was written by the late 2nd/8th century Shi'i, Naṣr b. Muzāḥim. The factual accuracy of those accounts that are extant may be questioned in the typical ways, and the authenticity of the highly literary poems and speeches that ornament the narratives of Abū Mikhnaf and Ibn Muzāḥim, purportedly composed and recited in the midst of desperate battles and somehow preserved in memory for decades, seems improbable. But at the same time, some of these accounts preserve material that seems to be quite early in origin. For example, Naṣr b. Muzāḥim's *Waq'at Siffin* contains passages that are clearly pre-Rāfiḍī in origin,⁵⁵ although Ibn Muzāḥim dies in 183, long after the Rāfiḍī and early Imāmi views of the *salhāba* had been established. His account makes no effort, as it well could have, to include narrative details and rhetoric that would support the Imāmi perspective as developed in the mid- to late 2nd/8th century. All of this suggests that Shi'i accounts of the events of the First Civil War began to be collected at a very early date, and that they were preserved in writing, which made it convenient for the material to be incorporated in large chunks by later, even rather pro-Sunni authors, such as al-Tabarī, and which also allowed their more primitive content to survive the Imāmi theological refinements of mid- to late 2nd/8th century Shi'ism.

Writing, Secret Knowledge and Communal Survival in the Shi'i *Hadith* Tradition

If some early 2nd/8th-century Shi'is struggled to preserve and promote a Shi'i counter-narrative of the events after the Prophet's death and of the contested early history of the Muslim community, Shi'i scholars from the mid-2nd/8th century seem more concerned with developing a systematic theological and legal basis for Shi'i differences with the non-Shi'i Muslim majority, although this clearly had already begun in a more rudimentary way among the followers of Muḥammad al-Baqir (d. 115 or 119/733 or 737). A key element of this emerging theology, from the time of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) onwards, was the superior knowledge of the Imāmi Imams as the

⁵⁴ Ahmad b. 'Alī al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, ed. M. J. al-Nā'inī (Beirut, 1988), vol. 1, pp. 76, 315; Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, pp. 99–101 and 115–116.

⁵⁵ The Rāfiḍī Shi'i perspective seems almost entirely absent from this text, as are the more elaborate arguments for 'Alī's authority as they developed in later Shi'i thought. For example, 'Alī's legitimacy is premised simply on his precedence (*sabiqah*) in Islam; there is no real antipathy toward Abū Bakr or 'Umar (who are in one account described as 'jayyid', or 'good', see p. 293), and no accusations that they had usurped 'Alī's authority. And in one passage 'Alī prohibits his followers from cursing his, or their, enemies; see p. 103.

essential basis of their spiritual authority, and the importance of knowledge in general within the Imāmi community. Large sections of al-Kulaynī's *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, as well as earlier pre-canonical compilations, most notably Ahmad al-Barqī's (d. 274/887–888 or 280/893–894), *Mafāḥsin* and al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī's (d. 290/902–903) *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt* are devoted to this subject. The sheer amount of material on knowledge and its role in religious life distinguishes early Shi'i *ḥadīth* compilations from the earliest Sunni canonical collections, where the sections on knowledge are much shorter and less systematic in organisation. But the discussions of knowledge in Shi'i *ḥadīth* collections are also distinguished by the extent to which they represent true knowledge as hidden and inaccessible to some, or even to all but a few,⁵⁶ and by the role that writing and written texts – real or symbolic – play in the Shi'i conception of spiritual knowledge.

While the Imams' knowledge came from a variety of unique sources, the Imāmi *ḥadīth* literature attributes some of their knowledge to a series of mysterious texts said to exist in the sole possession of the Imams, and passed from one Imam to the next. In many cases, traditions about these extraordinary written documents in the possession of the Imams appear to be extrapolations from simpler, earlier accounts. The widely reported account of the Prophet being denied his request to have his final will and testament recorded in writing is directly connected to traditions about a private testimony given to Fāṭima, either by the Prophet, or the Angel Gabriel, which she then dictated to 'Alī. In Shi'i *ḥadīth* tradition, this text, which is referred to as the codex of Fāṭima (*mushaf Fāṭima*),⁵⁷ or sometimes the tablet of Fāṭima (*lawḥ Fāṭima*),⁵⁸ is said to contain knowledge of all future Imams and the history of the *ahī al-bayt*.⁵⁹ The tradition that 'Alī kept a sheet of paper in the sheath of his sword that contained some written guidelines regarding the bloodwit (*diyya*)⁶⁰ may be the basis for the many references in Shi'i *ḥadīth* to the 'Book of 'Alī' (*Kiṭāb 'Alī*), that is said to contain far more elaborate information concerning a variety of legal issues, as well as lists of future rulers and kings.⁶¹ And the account of 'Alī compiling the Qur'anic

revelations after the death of the Prophet and offering the collection to Abū Bakr – who did not accept it – becomes the basis for the idea that the Imams alone possess the true Qur'anic text and its Prophetic commentary.⁶² This belief further led to traditions that asserted small, but significant omissions from the 'Uṡmāni compilation of the Qur'anic text, which are detailed in one of the largest individual chapters in al-Kulaynī's *Uṣūl al-kāfi* containing over 90 traditions, related on the authority of several different Imams.⁶³ Later Imāmi tradition rejected all suggestions and assertions that compromised the essential integrity of the 'Uṡmāni codex, insisting that it was only the inclusion of Prophetic commentary that distinguished 'Alī's collection from the 'Uṡmāni codex.⁶⁴ But the assertion that the Imams possessed the only copy of a full Prophetic commentary on the Qur'anic text is powerful enough a claim on its own, especially given the relative paucity of direct Prophetic commentary on the Qur'an that is found in non-Shi'i tradition.

The Shi'i *ḥadīth* tradition also goes on to describe a series of books in the Imams' possession, all of which afford the Imams extraordinary, unparalleled, miraculous, even revelatory knowledge, including books containing the names of all Shi'is until the end of time,⁶⁵ as well as the original copies of earlier scriptures, including the Torah and the Gospel.⁶⁶ Perhaps as a corollary to these latter traditions, the Imams were said to possess knowledge of all languages⁶⁷ (presumably allowing them to read these earlier scriptures), as well as the esoteric 'language of the birds'.⁶⁸ It is not hard to see how extraordinary traditions developed from more ordinary ones, or how one extraordinary claim regarding the Imams' knowledge led to, or even logically necessitated, another. Questions of origin and authenticity aside, however, these traditions play a substantial role in Shi'i *ḥadīth* traditions that describe the nature of the Imams' knowledge. More importantly, such traditions unmistakably imply that true knowledge is the preserve of a few, and that it is kept that way, in part, through the use of written texts which could be easily hidden and secreted away, and transmitted quietly and in clandestine fashion, if need be, from one generation to the next.

If the soundest religious knowledge in the Sunni tradition was that which was most well-known, most widely circulated and transmitted, and made public in open teaching sessions via oral transmission and recitation, the most sacred knowledge in Shi'ism was that possessed exclusively by the Imams, and kept, in part, in secret written texts whose contents were never fully divulged, even to their followers. Whatever the references to such books and hidden knowledge possessed by the Imams might

⁵⁶ A famous early tradition repeatedly cited in Shi'i *ḥadīth* sources from earliest times states the teachings of the Imams are difficult to grasp (*ṣaḥ*), and that they can only be understood by the angels, prophets and the rarest believers. See Ja'far al-Hadrami, *Asī*, in *al-Uṣūl al-sittat'ashar*, p. 65; al-Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 466–467, for fairly comprehensive collection of the tradition in earlier works, see Muḥammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihār al-anwār* (Tehran, 1956–1972), vol. 2, pp. 183–197, 208–213.

⁵⁷ Al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī, *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, vol. 1, pp. 294–298, 304–325; M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, tr. D. Streight (Albany, NY, 1994), p. 74.

⁵⁸ Al-Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 605–606, 610–611; al-Ṭabrisi, *Ihtijāj*, pp. 162–166.

⁵⁹ In *Asī* Ḥasim b. Ḥumayd al-Hannafī in *al-Uṣūl al-sittat'ashar* (Tehran, 1951–1952), p. 23, similar knowledge is said to be contained in the *wasīyya* of Fāṭima.

⁶⁰ Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, K. al-*ṭih*, *ḥadīth* 111; Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, pp. 6, 12–13.

⁶¹ For a full discussion of the *Kiṭāb 'Alī*, see Modarressi, pp. 4–12 and Andrew Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism: Ḥadīth as Discourse between Qumm and Bagdad* (Richmond, Surrey, 2000), p. 124.

⁶² See, for example, al-Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 284–286; al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī, *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, vol. 1, pp. 384–392.

⁶³ Al-Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 479–506.

⁶⁴ Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, p. 16.

⁶⁵ Al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī, *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, vol. 1, pp. 341–346.

⁶⁶ Al-Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 281–284; al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī, *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, vol. 1, pp. 276–288.

⁶⁷ Al-Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, p. 284.

⁶⁸ Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide*, p. 16.

mean, and regardless of their alleged content, to posit their very existence as the source of truest knowledge is already to assume a position of resistance – symbolic or otherwise – to the dominant Islamic intellectual culture. To establish that knowledge does not belong to the majority, but to the minority, and that this knowledge was such that it needed to remain hidden from the majority, is to create an intellectual and spiritual space in which the Shi'i perspective could flourish and survive among its adherents without openly challenging the dominant tradition. At the same time, this conception of the nature of true religious knowledge as the hidden preserve of the spiritual elite (that is, the Shi'is, by their own formulation), made the Shi'i perspective, as it was understood by Shi'is themselves, somewhat resistant to external intellectual challenges by undermining the very principles of knowledge creation and transmission upon which that prevailing intellectual tradition was based.

Writing and Shi'i Transmission of the Imams' Teaching

Given the symbolic importance of the Imams as keepers of secret texts, it seems rather natural that their disciples would have used private written texts themselves to record and preserve the purported teachings of the Imams, and it is clear from both direct and indirect textual evidence that they did so regularly. These written records of the Imams' teaching sometimes took the form of thematically unified compilations – such as collections of *tafsir* traditions from Muhammad al-Baqir, of accounts pertaining to early historical events, such as battles of the First Civil War, or of the Imams' teachings on a particular issue of law or ritual – but were more often simply informal collections of traditions an individual disciple had heard and recorded from the Imam or one of his associates. Although only a relative handful of these are currently extant, Shi'i bibliographical works attest to hundreds of these collections with diverse content and unsystematic presentation, which are referred to as '*usul*' ('sources' or 'notebooks') because they contain the raw source material from which the later systematic and thematic collections of Shi'i *hadith* were compiled. While this process whereby private, informal written collections were later incorporated into systematic, published works has long been recognised as formative for the Imami Shi'i *hadith* tradition, more recent scholarship has argued for the existence of a somewhat similar process in the Sunni tradition as well, although the strong predilection for the ideal of oral transmission meant that this process was not fully acknowledged. Schoeler maintains that there was a period during which *hadith* began to be written down in private, unsystematic collections, and that this period preceded the compilation of the early, pre-canonical Sunni *musannaf* works in the early 3rd/9th century, and to some degree, facilitated it.⁶⁹ Harald Motzki has also argued convincingly that these early *musannaf* works seem to have relied on both written and oral sources, some of which likely preserve material that authentically originates as early as the

first Islamic century.⁷⁰ Even if the processes whereby the Sunni and Shi'i canonical *hadith* traditions were formed are analogous in some ways, and went through similar stages, the use of written texts in the formation of the early Shi'i tradition was based on a profoundly different set of historical circumstances and intellectual and religious premises, and as such, carried unique significance.

Sunnis, who viewed all authentic religious knowledge as originating ideally with the Prophet and his Companions, were separated from this ultimate source of knowledge by historical time, and the oral tradition of transmission enshrined in the *isnad* was a chain that allowed them to traverse that distance in a virtual sense, the personal, face-to-face transmission substituting for the direct teaching of the Prophet. For 2nd/8th-century Shi'is, however, the living Imam, and not the *isnad*, was their link to the religious authority of the Prophet, and most Shi'is in this period were separated from their Imam by geographical, rather than temporal distance. Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja'far al-Sadiq, the two Imams who collectively represent the origin of approximately 80–90 per cent of the Imami Shi'i *hadith* tradition, lived all their lives in Medina, while the majority of their disciples – including many who were transmitters of their teachings – were resident in Kufa. Most Kufan Shi'is at this time would have had the opportunity of seeing their Imam only once or twice in their lifetimes – probably often in conjunction with performing the *hajj*⁷¹ – while others would have been completely dependent on the reports they received of the Imams' teachings from their fellow Shi'is who had the opportunity to visit them. Because even many of those who were able to visit the Imam would not have had the luxury of staying with him long enough to memorise and review whatever they had learned, it hardly seems unlikely that many would have availed themselves of written notes to better preserve what they had heard in order to share it with their fellow Shi'is in Kufa.

In contrast to the Sunni tradition, in which the practical use of written notes co-existed with the ideal that all religious knowledge be learned and transmitted orally, the Shi'i Imams reveal no discomfort with their disciples' recording their teachings in written form. In fact, far from manifesting ambivalence about the use of written texts for this purpose, the sixth Imam is reported to have directly encouraged it, telling his followers, 'Write, for you will not remember (*yafiqazun*) unless you write,⁷² and 'The heart trusts in writing'.⁷³ These two traditions are found in a single chapter in al-Kulayni's Book on the Superiority of Knowledge (*Kitāb faḍl al-'ilm*)

⁶⁹ Harald Motzki, 'The *Musannaf* of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-San'āni as a Source of Authentic *Hadith* of the First Century A.H.', *JNES*, 30 (1991), pp. 1–21.

⁷⁰ There are many traditions that indicate that Shi'is would frequently visit the Imam in conjunction with their pilgrimage to Mecca, or else during the *hajj* rituals themselves, which paradoxically would afford the Imam and his disciple some anonymity, and hence privacy, among the crowds of pilgrims. For example, see Zayd al-Narsi, *Asl, in Usul sittat 'ashar*, p. 48 and al-Kulayni, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, p. 449.

⁷¹ Al-Kulayni, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, pp. 104–105; for a slightly longer version of this, see *Asl Āsim b. al-Humayd al-Hanafi*, pp. 25 and 34.

⁷² Al-Kulayni, *Kāfi*, vol. 1, p. 104.

⁶⁹ Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam*, ch. 5.

containing 15 *ahādīth* that are almost entirely dedicated to encouraging the use of written texts in not only the preservation, but also the transmission of the Imams' teachings. One of these traditions is attributed to al-Ṣādiq by Muḥaddal b. 'Umar, a figure accused of extremism and generally considered unreliable.⁷⁴

Write and spread your knowledge among your brothers. And if you die, then bequeath your books to your sons. For a time of tribulation will come upon people, in which there will be none to keep them company save their books.⁷⁵

Another tradition suggests the manner in which these texts may have been used as tools for instructing the Shi'i disciples in Kūfa. In this *ḥadīth*, 'Abd Allāh b. Sinān, a reliable transmitter and disciple of al-Ṣādiq complains to the Imam, saying:⁷⁶

A group came to me to listen to your *ḥadīth*, but it was difficult for me, for I am not strong. [Al-Ṣādiq] said: 'So read them a *ḥadīth* from the beginning of it, and a *ḥadīth* from the middle of it, and a *ḥadīth* from the end of it.'⁷⁷

This *ḥadīth* clearly suggests that 'Abd Allāh b. Sinān possessed a written collection of the Imams' teachings from which he might instruct his fellow Shi'is and that it was long enough to tire him if he attempted to read it all.

In addition to allowing the use of written texts for both preserving and transmitting the Imams' teachings, the *ahādīth* in this chapter also allow the transmission of, and reliance upon, written texts without the author's explicit permission, that is, transmitting their contents on the basis of *wijāda*, or 'finding'. A disciple puts the following question to 'Alī al-Riḍā:

A man from among our companions gave me a book but did not say, 'Transmit this from me'. Is it permissible for me to transmit it from him? [Al-Riḍā] said: 'If you know that the book was his, then transmit it from him.'⁷⁸

A similar issue is brought to the attention of the ninth Imam, Muḥammad al-Jawād.

May I be your ransom! Our elders used to relate traditions from Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, while [the need for] *taqiyā* was intense, so they hid their books and did not transmit from them. And when they died, the books came to us. [The Imam] said: 'Relate *ḥadīth* from them, for they are truthful.'⁷⁹

⁷⁴ See Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, pp. 333–334.

⁷⁵ Al-Kulaynī, *Kaḥfī*, vol. 1, p. 105.

⁷⁶ Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, pp. 157–161.

⁷⁷ Al-Kulaynī, *Kaḥfī*, vol. 1, p. 104.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

These practices would hardly be acceptable in Sunni *ḥadīth* methodology, at least as it was ideally construed, and the chapter contains other pieces of advice from the Imam that could only be considered as endorsing rather bad *ḥadīth* methodology by these standards. There is, for example, a tradition indicating that one need not be too concerned with transmitting the Imams' words precisely, so long as one was able to convey the intended meaning accurately;⁸⁰ another in which al-Ṣādiq indicates that one may relate a tradition from either himself or Muḥammad al-Bāqir, since all his knowledge derives from his father;⁸¹ and yet another that recommends citing one's sources for any *ḥadīth* one transmits, so that if the *ḥadīth* is untrue, blame will fall upon one's source rather than oneself.⁸²

The *ahādīth* in this chapter seem to provide the Imams' sanction for what can be described, at best, as a less than cautious methodology for transmitting their traditions, and at worst, as an endorsement, or belated justification, for practices that ultimately allowed a good deal of spurious and extremist material to enter into mainstream Imāmi Shi'i *ḥadīth*. But it should be noted that, as is often the case in Imāmi *ḥadīth* collections, these traditions are attributed to both very sound and more questionable transmitters, and cannot necessarily be dismissed as merely serving an extremist agenda. Moreover, the less than airtight *ḥadīth* methodology promoted in these traditions is clearly displayed in many canonical, and reliable, Shi'i *ahādīth*: some, for example, are not clear as to whether the tradition should be traced back to al-Bāqir or al-Ṣādiq, with the attribution left open by narrating the tradition on the authority of 'one of these two' (*ahādithumā*), and many others contain imperfect or incomplete *isnāds*. In theory, however, none of this would have meant very much as long as the Imams were present to correct any errors or resolve any discrepancies, as they would have been in the 2nd/8th, and, to a lesser extent, 3rd/9th centuries. In fact, *isnād* criticism as the basis of authenticating *ḥadīth* seems to emerge rather belatedly in Shi'i tradition for this reason, and even then, seems to have carried less weight and significance than it did in the Sunni tradition. In his study of the formative Imāmi *ḥadīth* tradition, Andrew Newman observed that while the 4th/10th-century canonical compiler al-Kulaynī attempted to pare down some of the more extremist content of the expansive Imāmi *ḥadīth* literature in circulation, he clearly did so, not by excising traditions related from unreliable transmitters, but rather by eliminating traditions based on their extremist content (*maṭn*).⁸⁴ And indeed we sometimes see in the Shi'i *riḥāl* literature transmitters – even prominent ones – being criticised on the basis of the content of the *ahādīth* ascribed to them, even as their sometimes prolific transmission or closeness to a particular Imam is simultaneously noted. More importantly, this differential approach to *isnād* and *maṭn* criticism, in conjunction with the prevalence, and apparently greater authority, of written texts in the early

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁸³ Kohlberg, 'al-Usul al-arba'umī'a', p. 139.

⁸⁴ Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism*, pp. 136–137.

Shi'i tradition relative to its Sunni counterpart, meant that Shi'i traditions were rarely excised on the exclusive basis of either the *isnād* or the *maṭn*. They were, for the most part, allowed to continue to circulate within the tradition, since the systematic Shi'i *riḡāl* literature emerged only after canonical and pre-canonical collections of Shi'i *ḥadīth* had already been set in writing and so were, in essence, 'facts on the ground'.

In encouraging their followers to use written texts, and sanctioning a relatively lax approach to the use of *isnāds* in the process of transmitting their *alḥādīth*, the Imams' primary concern was probably to ensure the survival of their religious teachings, and to allow for their quiet and private circulation among their followers in Kūfa. The Imams may also have had far fewer scruples about the written transmission of religious knowledge by virtue of their residence in Madīna, whose scholarly culture after the time of al-Zuhri became more open to the use of writing than that of Kūfa.⁸⁵ And if the ideal of oral transmission still dominated the intellectual atmosphere of Kūfa, then the Kūfan Shi'i's reliance on written texts, with the sanction of their Imams, would have allowed them to circulate their Imams' teachings without engaging or confronting the larger intellectual circles around them, while also reinforcing their sense of community, in part by emphasising their differences with the non-Shi'i majority on the very source of religious knowledge, not merely its content.

Conclusion

The use of writing among the early Imāmi Shi'is was a successful strategy for preserving their early teachings in a form that both concealed them from wider public view and allowed them to survive their compilers. Concealing such texts in writing during dangerous times allowed not only for their survival but, as we have seen, also for their incorporation within, and influence upon, the subsequent tradition by virtue of their early compilation which would have given them an air of credibility. Moreover, the fixed and stable form of written texts made incorporating them wholesale into later works easy and appealing, even for those who at least outwardly maintained their scruples regarding oral transmission. Indeed the practical result of the use of written texts to transmit Shi'i ideas prevalent in the pre-*ghayba* period was that much of this early material was preserved, and continued to be circulated, even after the official compilation of Imāmi *ḥadīth* collections in the 4th–5th/10th–11th centuries. Although there were important Shi'i scholars who sought to discredit some of the more extremist content of this earlier material, it was never excised from the tradition. The continued presence and influence of this early material is evident, for example in the library of the 7th/13th-century Shi'i scholar Ibn Ṭāwūs (as reconstructed by Kohlberg) and, much later, in the massive *ḥadīth* compilation of the Safāwīd author

al-Majlisī, in his 110-volume *Bihār al-anwār*.⁸⁶ In addition to its practical contribution to the preservation of some elements of early Shi'i thought, the use of written texts was, on a deeper level, philosophically consistent with, and an extension of, the notion of the Imams' true knowledge as esoteric and hidden – exclusively possessed and cautiously and privately disseminated. As such, it presents a direct contrast to some of the prevailing conceptions of knowledge and its transmission in the contemporary Sunni tradition, and thus points to a unique and coherent Shi'i view of the nature of religious knowledge which was consistent with its larger theological premises, and which existed as a subtext of Shi'i sectarian differences with the non-Shi'i community.

⁸⁵ Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam*, p. 50.

⁸⁶ Eran Kohlberg, *A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work: Ibn Ṭāwūs and His Library* (Leiden, 1992).