

## 7 | The Epistolary Imamate: Circular Letters in the Administration of the Shi‘i Community

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### Introduction

There is a divide between documentary specialists and historians. This is particularly true of historians who deal with early Shi‘i topics, who remain almost entirely untouched by the turn to material culture which has made such an impact on other fields of the humanities. Nor has the study of early Shi‘ism been touched by the impetus to material sources inspired by the revisionist challenge to literary sources since the 1970s. This is a shame, because Shi‘a Muslims in the early period were highly aware of the intersection between the materiality and the spiritual function of their divinely guided leaders, the imams. Their interest in the imams as material embodiments of divine guidance resulted in Shi‘i hadith compilers recording a wealth of interesting details regarding the lives and activities of the imams. As a member of the Leiden “Embedding Conquest” project,<sup>1</sup> I have been fortunate to be surrounded by a team of people who are working intensively with material sources for early Islamic history. This experience has provided me with a set of parallels that open up the broader relevance of this Shi‘i hadith material. Here, I look at a dossier of reports which I have gathered from the Shi‘i hadith corpus, which purport to transmit letters and communications between the Imami Shi‘i imams and their followers.

The corpus of imamic letters in Shi‘i hadith sources is relevant for three fields: Shi‘i studies, Arabic documentary studies and the history of social institutions and administration in the Islamic empire. The letters written to and from the Shi‘i imams give us a clearer sense of the social context of processes of production, use, dissemination and preservation of letters in the wider imperial society beyond the specific (usually Egyptian) contexts for which papyri and parchment have been preserved. For Shi‘i studies these letters give us a clearer sense of the material and social context of the imams and their relations with their followers. This is particularly valuable in a scholarly environment where most attention

<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to this volume.

has been given to theological and doctrinal topics, without providing a clear sense of the social background to these intellectual developments. In the realm of Islamicate social history, letters (which were a ubiquitous yet highly personalizable tool) allow us to see how different constituencies within the broader empire used similar tools in slightly different ways, thus providing a frame of reference for assessing the dominant structures and mechanisms within which the lives of individuals were led, both enabling and limiting social action. Thus, by looking at these letters, we can place the imam as a figure of authority in company with other comparable authorities like bishops, *geonim*, *dā'īs* and muftis, as well as viziers, governors and bureaucrats in governmental administrations. This paper, then, makes the case for abandoning the common reflexive paradigm of "Shi'ī exceptionalism" in which Shi'ī materials are abandoned as irrelevant to larger patterns in the Islamic empire. In what follows I will focus exclusively on the Imami Shi'ā, to the exclusion of Zaydi and Ismaili currents of Shi'ism, though I would expect some of the insights to be relevant to those communities also.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I will give a general overview of the system in which imamic letters operate. Then I will look in more detail at the mechanisms by which letters reached the community, including the mediation of agents of the imams. In particular I will look at circular letters as illustrative of the ways in which the imam attempted to reach sections of his community beyond specific individuals, and the ways that these illuminate the distinctive aspects of Shi'ī community organization. In spite of this current focus on circular letters, it should be understood that imamic letters in our sources typically appear as issued to individual believers<sup>3</sup> rather than in the form of encyclicals, in contrast, for example, to Christian bishops who commonly issued letters for broad distribution.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a definition of Imami Shi'ism, see Hassan Ansari, *L'imamat et l'occultation selon l'imamisme: Étude bibliographique et histoire des textes* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), xix.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. the rescript issued to al-Bilālī to warn him not to deny the imam, which only came to be preserved in Twelver sources because al-Bilālī showed it to a hadith transmitter to copy, Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl al-dīn wa-tamām al-ni'ma fī ithbāt al-ghayba*, edited by 'Alī Akbar Ghaffārī, (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya), 499.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. the episcopal correspondence dealt with in Philip Wood, "Lest the Faithful Doubt or the Heretics Mock": Patriarchs, Caliphs and Implementing Excommunication in the Jacobite Church c.650–850." *Al-Masāq* 35 (2022): 76–94.

## Background: The Imami Imams of the “Late Imamate”

The Imami Shi‘i imams were a line of hereditary religious leaders who succeeded each other in a father-to-son sequence until the imamate collapsed in 260/874, followed by a period known as the “occultation” (Arabic, *ghayba*), during which it was believed that there was no direct imamic leadership, the community instead being guided by a messianic hidden imam who would return sometime in the future, bringing justice to the world. Almost no Shi‘i sources survive which are contemporary with the lives of the imams. Nonetheless, given careful analysis, Shi‘i books compiled in the late ninth to eleventh centuries CE can give us detailed information. Hitherto, there has been little interest in reconstructing the institutional dynamics of early Imami Shi‘ism, and, as such, we know little about the practical dynamics of imamate. While a study of Islamic theology leads one to compare the imams as equivalent to Muslim politico-religious leaders like caliphs,<sup>5</sup> institutional analysis suggests that perhaps a better comparison is with religious leaders in other non-hegemonic communities, like the bishops and patriarchs of various Christian groups or the *geons* and *nāgids* of the Jews.

The period I will focus on is what I will call the “late imamate”: in particular the imamates of ‘Alī al-Hādī (r. 220–54/835–68 CE) and al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarī (d. 260/874). I will also include the early occultation period from 260/874 until the collapse of the agentship of the hidden imam in 328/940, a period in which many of the institutions of imamate persisted in the absence of an imam. Following the high prestige and huge hadith attribution of the foundational imams Bāqir (d. ca 117/735) and Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), the late imamate is characterized by a rapprochement with the Abbasid caliphal court, but also paranoia, governmental surveillance and intermittent persecution. ‘Alī al-Riḍā agreed, late in his life, to become the heir apparent to the Abbasid caliph Ma’mūn (d. 218/833). Though he died fifteen years before Ma’mūn, the rapprochement that Riḍā participated in had consequences that persisted until the collapse of the imamate and the start of the occultation in 260/874. After al-Riḍā, all of the imams were brought to live close to the caliphal court at some point, and the last two, Hādī and ‘Askarī, lived in Samarra under what scholars usually call “house

<sup>5</sup> Crone’s overview of the development of different Shi‘i and non-Shi‘i visions of imamate and caliphate is the most successful and accessible broad comparison hitherto but very much based on doctrines and theologized narrative. Patricia Crone, *God’s Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

arrest,” but the details of which have yet to be carefully studied.<sup>6</sup> During this period the imams were under government surveillance, and this perhaps contributed to the logistical challenge of communicating with their followers who lived in various places from Central Asia to Egypt. However, their sequestration in Iraq brought the imams out of the Ḥijāz and into closer proximity with a majority of their followers who had historically been located in Iraq, although their followers were also increasingly visible in central Iran. As in the case of other pre-modern leaders and administrators, letters were crucial vehicles for extending the authority of the imam into regions where he did not travel himself. We also sometimes see letters being produced and sent to the imam by followers who were physically located in the same city,<sup>7</sup> suggesting that access to the imam was limited, perhaps from fear of surveillance and persecution, or perhaps simply because audience with the imam was restricted.

The relative impotence of the imam also meant that his reliance on letter-carriers could be manipulated by imamic agents who had their own ideas about how his authority should be mediated. Thus, during the imamates of the tenth imam, ‘Alī al-Ḥādī, and the eleventh imam, al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarī, we see a rise in the appearance of so-called Gateways (*bābs*), at least one of whom had been an agent,<sup>8</sup> who claimed charismatic, quasi-divine authority as unauthorized spokesmen of the imam. After the death of the eleventh imam in 260/874, this tendency towards the autonomy of imamic agents became complete, as a successor was not found, and instead, a core of the new Twelver community eventually came to accept the existence of a hidden imam whose leadership was mediated by a sequence of four agents or “Envoys of the hidden imam” until 328/ 940.<sup>9</sup> My intervention here could be reasonably criticized for bringing together reports dealing with both pre-occultation and occultation-era epistolary practices, as the structures of the community changed dramatically after 260/874. However, an important aspect of the agents of the occultation era was the perpetuation of pre-occultation institutions, and although these institutions mutated under their leadership, the interest of our sources in recording these details makes them too useful to my analysis to ignore.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Wilferd Madelung, “‘Alī al-Ḥādī,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, I/8, pp. 861–62.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. the mission of the Qummi Aḥmad b. Ishāq to Baghdad: Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī, *Al-Kāfī*. (Tehran: Dār al-kutub al-islāmiyya, 1388-1391 H [1968-1971]) 1:517-18.

<sup>8</sup> Fāris b. Ḥatīm. See Edmund Hayes, “The Imam who Might Have Been.” In *Reason, Esotericism, and the Construction of Authority in Shi‘i Islam*, ed. Rodrigo Adem and Edmund Hayes (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> See Hayes, *Agents of the Hidden Imam: Forging Twelver Shi‘ism, 850–950 CE*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

## Sources and Corpus

The sources I have drawn upon in order to assemble a dossier of imamic letters include hadith compilations, biographical works (*rijāl*) and legal-hadith works, written or compiled during the early tenth to mid-eleventh century,<sup>10</sup> that is, starting from a generation after the death of the last visible imam and contemporary with the period of the leadership of the agents of the hidden imam and after. These works incorporated earlier books and hadith compilations into new formats to meet evolving needs, but sometimes the structure of the earlier works they cannibalize are visible within them or can be reconstructed using *isnād* analysis and bio-bibliographical citations.<sup>11</sup> The larger of these works are multi-topic, as the imams were regarded as authoritative advisors on all areas of life. The major interests of the compilers were theological, legal, hagiographical and ethical, but the works also contain a whole gamut of literary fossils including myth, poetry, liturgy, magic, and dietary and medical advice.

The corpus of letters I am addressing here are letters that I drew together myself from these sources. However, one does occasionally find groups of letters in some of the books I draw upon, suggesting that earlier acts of grouping may still be visible in these later works, and we see references to many lost collections of letters and questions and answers mentioned in the bibliographical literature. A key area in which sets of letters appear together are the chapters on letters issued in the name of the hidden imam in works aimed at proving his existence. While these collections had an apologetic purpose, they nonetheless reveal interesting and plausible details about the administrative institutions of the occultation-era Shi'i leadership and the place letters had within them.

## Letter Types in the Hadith Corpus

A number of different Arabic words are associated with what I have thus far been calling the "letters" of the imams. These are the petitioning note (*ruq'a*), the document (*kitāb*), the epistle (*risāla*), the rescript (*tawqī'*), the responsa

<sup>10</sup> In particular Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, ed. 'Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiya, 1388 AH [1968]); Kashshī, *Ikhtiyār ma'rifat al-rijāl*, ed. Mahdī al-Rijā'ī (Qumm: Mu'assasat al-al-bayt, 1404 H [1983-4]); Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl al-dīn wa tamām al-ni'ma fī ithbāt al-ghayba*, ed. 'Alī Akbar Ghaffārī, (Tehran: Intishārāt-i masjid-i muqaddas-i Jumrukān, 1384 [2006]). I have also looked at earlier sources from the ninth century which frame my understanding of the larger phenomenon of imamic letters but which I do not cite here.

<sup>11</sup> See Ansari, *Limamat*; Kohlberg, "Shi'i Hadith. Introduction." In *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law*, eds. Gurdofarid Miskinzoda and Farhad Daftary (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

(*mas'ala*, *masā'il*) and the receipt (*qabaḍ*, *qubūḍ*).<sup>12</sup> There are also other letters which I will not detail here, which are personal communications rather than letters in which the imam is acting in his official capacity as community leader; for example, a letter of condolence sent to Khayzurān (d. 172/789), the wife of the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī (d. 169/785).<sup>13</sup> The word for letter (*kitāb*) refers to general correspondence,<sup>14</sup> as well as the literary meaning of a treatise or book.<sup>15</sup> One of the most common words we come across is the petitioning note (*ruq'a*) to the imam.<sup>16</sup> The topics of these petitions, also regularly referred to the “prayer” or “supplications” (*du'ā'*) that a member of the community asked to be said to God by the imam on his behalf, on various topics including asking for forgiveness<sup>17</sup> or a blessing or some particular request such as a request for the birth of a child.<sup>18</sup> While the imam was not in government or the caliphal judiciary, he was a parallel source of authority to whom people could have recourse to solve their problems.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that many of these pious petitions accompany money sent to the imam, apparently in fulfilment of the alms taxes (*zakāt* or *khums*). This suggests a certain transactional quality in the epistolary relations between the institutions of imamate and the community, if not a direct quid pro quo, a relationship I have called the “sacred economy” of the imamate, in which community members paid alms taxes and gifts and other kinds of wealth and received blessings and religious advice and support.<sup>20</sup> The letters of the imams occasionally do explicitly stress the link between paying him the alms taxes and the salvation of the donor.

<sup>12</sup> No receipts have been copied and preserved in the Imami hadith corpus, but they are occasionally referred to in reference to the alms-tax collection activities of the imamic agents.

<sup>13</sup> Abū al-ʿAbbās ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaʿfar al-Ḥimyārī, *Qurb al-isnād*, ed. anon. (Qumm: Muʿassasat al-al-bayt ʿalayhim al-salām li-ihyāʾ al-turāth, 1413 AH), 306–308.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 473; 475–76.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 498.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 488.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 490.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 489. This report does not include the word *ruq'a* but follows the format of other accounts of *ruq'a* notes.

<sup>19</sup> This religious sense of petition to the imam places them somewhat apart from the usage of the word “petition” in Arabic documentary studies, which tends to refer to government or judiciary officials. However, while they have clear differences, there are certain aspects that place them on a continuum, such as the “*in raʾayta*” formula used in both corpora. For petitions in governmental and judicial contexts, see e.g. Geoffrey Khan, “The Historical Development of the Structure of Medieval Arabic Petitions.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 53 (1990): 8–30; Yaacov Lev, *The Administration of Justice in Medieval Egypt, from the 7th to the 12th Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), Chapter 6.

<sup>20</sup> See Edmund Hayes, “The Imams as Economic Actors: Early Imami Shiʿism as a ‘Sacred Economy.’” In *Land and Trade in Early Islam*, eds Fanny Bessard and Hugh Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

A common word applied to letters issued by the imamate is the rescript or *tawqīʿ*, which often seems to be used as a blanket term for letters from the imam<sup>21</sup> but has a narrower technical meaning of a response that is written directly onto the original request or petition.<sup>22</sup>

An important subcategory of letters to the imam are sets of legal, theological, exegetical and other miscellaneous questions (*masāʾil*) which are often responded to with *tawqīʿ* rescripts<sup>23</sup> on the back of the scroll or interlinear responses. These *responsa* form a generic bridge between communications with the imams in the pre-occultation period and the later legal-theological questions that linked Shīʿi scholars and members of the community, when *responsa* collections continue to be a common genre.<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes a receipt (*qabaḍ*, *qubūḍ*) is mentioned as being handed out once contributions have been received by imamic agents.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that receipts may have been used at the hinges in the network which brought the alms taxes from the provinces to the imam in Iraq, perhaps employed each time money changed hands to be forwarded to the imam. However, a certain polemical tone in the discourse suggests that if these receipts were designed to guarantee the honesty of the lower-ranking agent who represented the imams, then asking a receipt from an imamic representative might have been considered something of a slur. No texts of such receipts are preserved; they were not of interest to hadith compilers. Some-

<sup>21</sup> See the chapter entitled “Rescripts from the Imam” in Kulaynī, Ibn Bābawayh and Ṭūsī. In Ibn Bābawayh’s chapter dedicated to rescripts (*tawqīʿ*), for example, in the individual reports, the letter is often referred to using one of the other Arabic words surveyed here: *ruqʿa*.

<sup>22</sup> For the social and historical context of the use of the *tawqīʿ* in caliphal courts of redress, see Beatrice Gruendler, “*Tawqīʿ* (Apostille): Royal Brevity in the Pre-modern Islamic Appeals Court.” In *The Weaving of Words: Approaches to Classical Arabic Literature*, eds. Lale Behzadi and Vahid Behmardi (Beirut: Orient-Institut; Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2009), 101–30; and Maaik van Berkel, “Embezzlement and Reimbursement. Disciplining Officials in ‘Abbāsīd Baghdad (8th–10th centuries A.D.).” *International Journal of Public Administration* 34 (2011): 712–19.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 500.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. the collections of legal and doctrinal *responsa* from the pre-occultation imams compiled by ‘Abd Allāh b. Jaʿfar al-Ḥimyarī (Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. al-‘Abbās al-Asadī al-Kūfī al- Najāshī, *Rijāl* (or *Asmāʾ muṣannifi al-shīʿa*), ed. Mūsā al-Shubayrī al-Zanjānī (Qumm: Muʾassasat al-nashr al-islāmiyya: 1407 AH [1986 CE]), 91), and later legal and doctrinal *masāʾil* works such as the various *Masāʾil* of Mufīd, such as *Ajwibat al-masāʾil al-ḥājibiyya*, also known as *al-Masāʾil al-ʿukbariyya*, ed. anon. (Beirut: Majmaʿ al-buḥūth al-islāmiyya, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Thus, in one report, a *wakīl* bringing money to the second canonical Envoy (*saḥf*) of the hidden imam, Abū Jaʿfar, before he died, is told to hand the money over to Ibn Rawḥ (who would later become the third Envoy), presumably acting as a deputy to Abū Jaʿfar. When the *wakīl* asks for a receipt, Ibn Rawḥ complains to Abū Jaʿfar, and Abū Jaʿfar confirms that “whatever reaches Abū al-Qāsim [Ibn Rawḥ] reaches me.” Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 501–502.

times the *ruqʿa* appears to be conflated with the receipt.<sup>26</sup> The very mention of receipts is intriguing as it places imamic administration on a continuum with governmental tax-collection, for which large numbers of tax receipts on papyrus have survived.

## The Question of Authenticity

None of the Shiʿi letters discussed here exists in its original form. Rather, they were preserved in later works which had as their broad aim to preserve knowledge and make arguments about the people and events of recent Shiʿi history, and more broadly to attest to the imamate of the Shiʿi imams. There is, therefore, room for criticism of these sources. However, my analysis does not depend on all of the imamic letters studied here being the authentic words of the imam.<sup>27</sup> Instead I rely on these sources to build up a general picture of the institutions and procedures of the imamate. This picture would be left intact even if much of the content of the letters had been manipulated to serve particular doctrinal or political agendas. Furthermore, there are a number of aspects of the imamic letters that reassure one that they can, indeed, be used as reliable historical sources.<sup>28</sup> The style and context of several of the letters of the imams studied here do not make sense as polemical or apologetic fabrications. In particular, the letter to Ishāq b. Ismāʿīl, partially translated below, is complex, rambling, ad hoc and relates to a very particular case which has limited relevance beyond the time and the place it was produced. The letters of the late imams are not an especially good target for pious Shiʿi pseudepigraphy, as the imams of previous generations were more prestigious (in spite of the Twelver doctrinal assertion that the message of all the imams is identical and their words equally valid). In reports about the early occultation period, however, we can certainly detect an influence in our sources from the apologetic aim to justify the novel doctrine of the occultation of the twelfth imam through letters stemming from the agents of the imamate. However, the occultation-era letters

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 494.

<sup>27</sup> For a parallel context, see, in this volume, Noémie Lucas's discussion of the historicity of letters purporting to record communications between Umayyad caliphs and governors.

<sup>28</sup> While I do not make systematic claims about the authenticity of individual letters in this chapter, I have made arguments about the plausible authenticity of particular imamic letters within the Shiʿi hadith corpus elsewhere. Edmund Hayes, "Between Implementation and Legislation: The Shiʿi Imam Muḥammad al-Jawād's Khums Demand Letter of 220 AH/835 CE." *Islamic Law and Society* 28 (2021): 382–414.

chosen for analysis here are not those which are used as a support for the existence of the hidden imam<sup>29</sup> but rather those which relate to the mundane activities of the agents and other community members. As such, while these issues remain open to debate, I will proceed cautiously with the assumption that the image of the institutional structures that appears in these reports was not fabricated from whole cloth.

### Production of Letters: An Imamic Chancery?

Even if a letter was issued in the name of the imam, it was not necessarily written by the imam himself, or even by his direct order. This is most clearly the case during the early occultation, when there was no visible imam and the imamate was represented by agents whose legitimacy was supported by letters purporting to be from the hidden imam.<sup>30</sup> However, the delegation of imamic letter-writing is also a feature during the tenure of the historical imams, and we have clear statements of delegation by the imams in which we are told that responses from favoured agents of the imam are as good as responses from the imam himself.<sup>31</sup> Rather than assuming any given letter was penned by the imam himself, then, although I will talk about the letters attributed to a particular imam, I prefer to speak in terms of the “institutions of imamate,” which include all correspondence in the imam’s name regardless of the degree of the imam’s personal involvement in producing the text of the letter. Again, this will be familiar from the productions of governmental chanceries and judicial institutions which issued correspondence in the name of a ruler without his involvement in the details of drafting.<sup>32</sup>

Reports narrating events during the early occultation provide a particularly vivid glimpse of the institutions surrounding the production and authentication of imamic letters. I do not want to assert that the institutions of the occultation are fully representative of what came earlier. The agents of the occultation both maintained earlier imamic institutions and protocols and also adapted them in important ways. However, the institutions of

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. the claims that the “envoys” (*sufarāʿ*) were appointed directly by letter from the hidden imam. Hayes, *Agents of the Hidden Imam*, 128–30.

<sup>30</sup> See Hayes, *Agents of the Hidden Imam*, especially Chapter 5.

<sup>31</sup> Kulaynī, *Kāfī* 1, 329–30.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. the process of petitioning the governor that was dealt with by local officials (pagarchs), as argued by Mathieu Tillier, “Scribal Practices among Muslims and Christians: A Comparison between the Judicial Letters of Qurra b. Sharīk and Ḥenanishoʿ (1st century AH).” In *Scribal Practices and the Social Construction of Knowledge in Antiquity, Late Antiquity and Medieval Islam*, ed. Myriam Wissa (Louvain: Peeters, 2018), 197–221.

the imamate during the occultation are more visible precisely because they were contested, and therefore they give us a framework for understanding what had occurred previously, as the agents of the hidden imam legitimized themselves by drawing upon time-honoured customs. In particular, it is interesting to see that during the early occultation a number of different models of imamic authority were deployed by the agents. These included: the recycling and amendment of hadith statements of earlier imams; the issuing of explicit statements purported to stem from the hidden imam; statements whose exact origins were ambiguous but generally represented the imamic institutions; the opinions of the agents themselves; and even the opinions of scholars which were sought by agents of the imamate and then given the imamic imprimatur.<sup>33</sup> These varied models suggest a variegated set of procedures for producing, authenticating and disseminating imamic knowledge. This imamic knowledge did not issue from one person but was combined from a collage of living, dead and notional authorities, and united by the protocols of the imamate. It is difficult to conceive of the nature and scope of this imamic institution. Can we think of an imamic “chancery,” “administration” or “bureaucracy”? I will use these terms, but with trepidation: they may have the negative effect of suggesting a framework which was more formal, well-funded and institutionalized than the reality. In fact, the institutions of the imamate should be thought of as marginal, surviving at the interstices of power.

## Recipients, Physicality and Use

A key aspect of letters, in contrast to other kinds of imamic hadith, is their physicality at the moment of production. This allowed them to be copied and preserved both at the time and for later generations, but their physicality is also relevant for the way that they were used in their immediate context. I suggest that the appointment letter of Ibn Rāshid, below, remained in his hands and may thereby have functioned as a kind of certificate or recommendation letter. In order to so function, this and similar letters would have presumably been clearly visually identifiable as issuing from the imamic institution. In the realm of governmental administration we see the use of clearly visible certificatory mechanisms in the form of seals,<sup>34</sup> and

<sup>33</sup> Tūsi, *Ghayba*, 243.

<sup>34</sup> Petra M. Sijpesteijn, “Seals and Papyri from Early Islamic Egypt.” In *Seals and Sealing Practices in the Near East. Developments in Administration and Magic from Prehistory to the Islamic Period*, eds. Ilona Regulski, Kim Duistermaat and Peter Verkinderen (Louvain: Peeters, 2018), 171–82.

professional chancery layouts, scripts and formulae.<sup>35</sup> In the case of the imams, our sources sometimes mention as important symbols of authority the imamic seal-rings, passed down from generation to generation. Transmitters of letters sometimes mention that a letter was written by the imam in his own handwriting, a visible representation of imamic authority which came to be important as a proof of continuity during the rupture of the early occultation.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes we are even told that the ink or the seal on a letter was still wet when it arrived in the hands of a petitioner,<sup>37</sup> giving a sense of the immanence of the imam even in the period of his absence. This also implies that imamic letters were not only issued to people who were far distant but could also be issued to someone who was present at the imamic seat, waiting for a response to be issued. This is perhaps what is referred to in one report of a “visit (*ziyāra*) [to the imam] on the inside,” that is, to meet him in person, rather than wait for a response to be carried by an intermediary.<sup>38</sup>

Several reports record discussion about physical details which seem to relate to certification and authenticity. These details may well have been distorted, especially in those reports which have been preserved to prove the existence of the hidden imam. Nonetheless, we may take at face value the evidence they provide that this was a community of careful readers who had the utmost interest in the physical details and institutional circumstances of imamic communication, both with a view to verifying these communications and from a sense of the sacrality of physical objects that had emerged from the orbit of the imam. In one report a questioner asked the imam to show him his handwriting so he could be sure in the future if letters indeed came from the imam. However, the imam cautioned against using handwriting as a means of validating imamic communications, because one’s handwriting can vary when using “a thick or a fine pen.”<sup>39</sup> This kind of statement strengthens the legitimacy of letters from the imamic chancery as a corporate entity, rather than only direct letters from an imam. Likewise, the imam is depicted as affirming the blanket legitimacy of his delegates by saying that the commands of his agents “are my commands.”<sup>40</sup> This could not prevent speculation among followers, however, and signs of “true” imamic

<sup>35</sup> Petra M. Sijpesteijn, “Arabic Papyri and Islamic Egypt.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, eds. Roger S. Bagnall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 452–72.

<sup>36</sup> Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2, 808–809; Hayes, *Agents of the Hidden Imam*, 82–82; 129–30.

<sup>37</sup> Ṭūsī, *Ghayba*, 256–57.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 491.

<sup>39</sup> Kulaynī, *Kāfi*, 1: 513–14.

<sup>40</sup> Ṭūsī, *Ghayba*, 225.

correspondence are recorded. It is relatively common for a transmitter to specify that a letter arrived from the imam “in his handwriting” (*bi-khattihi*).<sup>41</sup>

During the perplexity of the early occultation era, the followers of the imam, unsurprisingly, were particularly interested in assuring themselves of the validity of the letters received from the imamic institutions. In one report during the early occultation, a scholar named Abū Ghālīb al-Zurārī (d. 368/978) brings a petition note to the hidden imam’s agent in Baghdad, waits for a few days, and then becomes anxious when there is no reply. His friend reassures him, suggesting that the delay is a good sign: “I prefer it because when the response is prompt, it originates from [the agent] al-Ḥusayn b. Rawḥ [d. 326/938], and if it takes a while, then it comes from the master (*al-ṣāḥib*) [i.e. the imam himself].”<sup>42</sup> In this case, Abū Ghālīb’s concern was to be justified later, for his communication with the imam was via Shalmaghānī (d. 322/934), who was later accused of heresy. Shalmaghānī’s accusation and ultimate execution by the caliphal authorities is the context for a number of reports which display particular interest in the physical processes of the imamic institutions, including details of the production, dictation, dissemination and preservation of the statement of anathematization of Shalmāghani.<sup>43</sup> In spite of the hagiographical use such reports were put to, the consistency of detail suggests that there was a system in place with a certain level of formality and standardization, at least enough to generate expectations among its participants.

These intricate patterns of correspondence can be seen in the broader context of Imami practices of secrecy, including pseudonymity; for example, the pseudonym of the first agent (*wakīl*, *safīr*) of the hidden imam, who was known as “the oil merchant” (*al-zayyāt*) or the butter merchant (*al-sammān*).<sup>44</sup> Other agents are recorded as having been known by names like “the sick one” (*al-‘alīl*) and “the squire” (*al-dihqān*). It is possible that these were just regular *nisbas*, but we have a clear case among the followers

<sup>41</sup> Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 3:5.

<sup>42</sup> Tūsi, *Ghayba*, 191–93.

<sup>43</sup> The interest in the physical details of production and preservation are taken yet further in the version which appears in Tūsi’s *Ghayba*, in which the transmitters have made sure to take note of all the variants between two versions which were transmitted, producing something like a pre-modern critical edition. It is interesting to ponder whether the variants in the text of the anathema were due to slightly different versions sent out by Ibn Rawḥ to different recipients, or to the process of transmission thereafter. More likely is the former. Tūsi, *Ghayba*, 257.

<sup>44</sup> Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 505.

of Shalmaghānī who were known by clearly pseudonymous monikers like “the ice-dealer” instead of their public names.<sup>45</sup>

## Circular Letters and Social Context

The letters of the late imamate and early occultation come with a transmission history which allows us to reconstruct the different kinds of interactions between the institutions of the imamate and the imam’s followers. Moments of crisis, rupture and contestation allow us to see most clearly the processes and limits of these institutions. Thus, the appointment of new agents and instances of heresy and excommunication are particularly fertile areas to consider. I have written a separate article on excommunication in the late imamate,<sup>46</sup> but here I will focus on the institutional mechanics of these epistolary exchanges. There were a number of different ways for imams to reach the community. All of these required mediation. Agents were appointed to represent different communities, and the activities of these agents are quite visible in the sources. However, this mediation also created a situation in which the charisma of the imamate was vested in someone other than the imam himself, and therefore the very existence of agents, while facilitating the extension of the imam’s authority, also provided a potential platform for undermining him. Thus, he had to deploy his authority carefully, and the letters show this.

In comparison with other non-hegemonic communities (e.g. the Jewish or Christian communities under Islamic rule), the Imami community’s self-conception was directly at odds with the status quo. This oppositional ethos, however, came from within the hegemonic Muslim tradition, posing a real threat to caliphal attempts to project their own legitimacy. This meant that Imami leaders often had to act in secrecy. While the circular letters of other community leaders could be posted up in a church, read out from a pulpit, or read out at festivals,<sup>47</sup> the letters from Shi‘i imams do not give the

<sup>45</sup> See the report of Yāqūt b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Al-Irshād al-arīb ilā ma‘rifat al-adīb* (E. J. W. Gibb memorial series, 6), ed. David S. Margoliouth (London/Leiden: Luzac/Brill, 1907), 1: 304. For the high prestige given to practices of secrecy, see Etan Kohlberg, “Some Imāmi-Shi‘i Views on Taqiyya,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 395–402; and Maria Massi Dakake, “Hiding in Plain Sight: The Practical and Doctrinal Significance of Secrecy in Shi‘ite Islam,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006): 326–55.

<sup>46</sup> See Edmund Hayes, “‘Smash His Head with a Rock’: Imāmic Excommunications and the Production of Deviance in Late Ninth-Century Imāmi Shi‘ism,” *Al-Masāq* 35 (2023): 54–75.

<sup>47</sup> Jewish festivals were a key moment in which boundaries were affirmed, with the lists of the blessed of the community followed by excommunications being read out to those assembled.

sense that they had such public forums at their disposal but seem to have been targeted at pivotal individuals who could thereafter pass on the imam's word to the recipient communities.

We have a number of letters which appear to have been targeted at an entire community or sets of communities. The *Rijāl* of Kashshī (d. ca. mid fourth/tenth century) preserves a series of reports that relate to the status of various followers of the imam. The reason for the preservation of these reports seems to have filled the function of providing later generations with a guide to which of the imams' followers were highly favoured and which, conversely, were ambivalent or heretical figures. These reports include a number of letters of appointment which attest to the complex procedures for reaching large sections of the community. For example, one letter, issued probably at the time of the imam 'Alī al-Hādī or al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī, is directed at "the entirety of the imam's followers (*mawālī*) who are resident in Baghdad and al-Madā'in [Ctesiphon] and the Sawād and what adjoins to them."<sup>48</sup> However, there is no clear indication that this letter would therefore have been read publicly. Instead, we are told that this letter was preserved and that "the copy of the letter was with Ibn Rāshid." Given that the subject of the letter was the imam's appointment of this same Ibn Rāshid as his agent, we might speculate that instead of being read publicly, the letter was issued directly into the hand of the newly appointed agent as a means of certification. Ibn Rāshid would then have been able to visit the communities in question armed with a letter proving his authority and his involvement in the imamic institutions. The letter also includes a demand for the payment of the imamic revenues (which the imam refers to in the letter as "my due" (*ḥaqqī*).)<sup>49</sup> The fact that money was expected to be handed over to Ibn Rāshid justifies why some kind of certification of his appointment was necessary in order to indicate his legitimacy when he came to people who did not yet know that he had been appointed as the imam's official representative. In this way, the letter would function as a kind of recommendation letter, providing physical evidence of a change in personnel.

The targeted reading out of the appointment letter of Ibn Rāshid can be compared to the letter of excommunication issued against the "heretic"

Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 203–204.

<sup>48</sup> Kashshī, *Rijāl* 2: 800.

<sup>49</sup> The term *ḥaqq* (pl. *ḥuqūq*) is used routinely in both Imami sources and in administrative papyri and business letters to refer to sums of money, debts and so forth.

Shalmāghani (executed a few decades later in 322/934), regarding which we are told:

Abū ‘Alī [b. Hammām al-Iskāfi the agent (d. 336/948)] took this rescript (*tawqī‘*) and did not leave any of the elders (*shuyūkh*) without reading it to them. Afterwards, it was sent from them in correspondence in his copy to the rest of the garrison cities (*amṣār*), and that became famous in the sect (*ṭā’ifa*) and they were unanimous in cursing him and disassociating from him.<sup>50</sup>

Again, we see a letter issued from the imamic institution (this time the agents writing on behalf of the absent imam) being taken and read to entire communities via selected intermediaries. The dynamics here are slightly clearer than in the case of Ibn Rāshid. The excommunication is transmitted both directly, with the agent reading it to the head (*shaykh*) of various local communities, and indirectly, as it was sent on again to other cities. However, it appears that even this second step was controlled by the agent, for it was sent “in his copy” (*bi-nuskhatihi*), rather than being dictated or transmitted orally. Presumably, a copy of the letter was made and included in correspondence with more distant agents. These agents would, one assumes, then repeat the same process of reading out the imamic communications to their communities or making authorized copies. The fact that the intermediaries are named “elders” (*shuyūkh*) suggests that they were not necessarily appointed by the imam but were perhaps local leaders prized by their communities for their rank, wisdom or scholarship.<sup>51</sup> These dynamics of dissemination via reading to selected intermediaries have parallels with caliphal governmental administrative practices in which we see letters being read out to local headmen for them to pass on the message to their communities.<sup>52</sup>

I shall now focus on a further, long letter, whose complex internal evidence provides a key witness for institutional dynamics of letter production, letter carriers and the variegated processes of dissemination. The

<sup>50</sup> Tūsī, *Gayba*, 257.

<sup>51</sup> Note, however, that high-ranking agents are commonly referred to in the sources as *al-shaykh*, notably the ‘Amrī envoys, father and son. In one report, we are even told of the “house of the *shaykhs*” in which the fourth Envoy is based. Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 503. Whether this was merely a private residence or a more formal seat of the leadership is difficult to tell.

<sup>52</sup> In her dissertation, Eline Scheerlinck notes that in two Greek letters on fugitives, the Umayyad governor of Egypt Qurra b. Sharik tells district administrator Basileios to summon all village heads and policemen of his district, read the governor’s letter to them, and send them home with copies to read aloud publicly in their respective villages. “Protective Interventions by Local Elites in the Countryside of Early Islamic Egypt.” PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2023. See also Eline Scheerlinck, “The Governor’s Orders. Part 2,” blog post, <https://emco.hcommons.org/2019/11/11/the-governors-orders-part-two/>, retrieved 10/07/2020.

letter is from the time of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, and brief mention should be made of the circumstances of his short, troubled imamate. In general, all imams were liable to experience difficulties in asserting their authority when they first succeeded to the imamate. The Imami Shiʿi community was rather fissiparous, with splits emerging upon most moments of succession, splits which took a few years or sometimes decades to resolve, if they were resolved at all. Al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, however, did not have the time to heal such splits, as he passed away after just six years as imam. He also inherited a community troubled by the claims to authority of esoterist *bābs* who undermined imamic authority.<sup>53</sup> The letter from al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī suggests that even loyal followers of the imam were pushing against direct imamic control. In it, the imam writes to a certain messenger or agent, Ishāq b. Ismāʿīl, who was responsible for communicating with the community in Nishapur. The imam's letter starts with a standard response to previous communication familiar from letters on papyrus:<sup>54</sup> "I have understood your letter, may God have mercy upon you ..." The call upon God's mercy is pointed because it appears from the imam's following comments that his correspondent had gone too far in asking, on behalf of his community, to be let off from paying dues to the imam. This letter is full of evocative rhetoric embedded in citations of Quranic passages. The deployment of this rhetoric is worthy of study in its own right, but here I will translate just those main points of the letter which illuminate the structure of correspondence with the community. The major purpose of the Quranic rhetoric is to underscore the importance of paying religiously sanctioned dues to the imams:

God imposed upon you dues for your imams [literally: masters/friends *awliyāʾ*] ... which he ordered you to pay to them to purify what you possess [lit: "what is behind your backs" (*mā warāʾa ḡuhūrikum*)], including your wives, your wealth, your food and drink and your knowledge ...

In an exasperated tone, the imam brings the sermon to a close and moves on to specific instructions:

[Our] discourse (*mukhāṭaba*) about what is between us and you and what belongs to you and what is incumbent upon you has gone on long enough. Were it not for having to perfect God's (be he glorified) blessings, then

<sup>53</sup> See Hayes, *Agents of the Hidden Imam*, especially 42–51, 148–59; Modarressi, *Crisis*, 66–105.

<sup>54</sup> E.g. *P.Berl.Arab.* II 52 .recto; *P.Marchands* II 19 .2, retrieved from the Arabic Papyrology Database, [www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/asearch.jsp](http://www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/apd/asearch.jsp), retrieved 13/07/20. Papyrus editions are cited following the abbreviations of the International Society for Arabic Papyrology (ISAP) checklist available at [www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/isap/isap\\_checklist/index.html](http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/isap/isap_checklist/index.html) (updated list).

He would not have made you see my handwriting, nor made you hear my words, after the late imam (peace be upon him) [died]. You are in a state of ignorance regarding your eschatological return to Him ...

And after my appointment of Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh over your [community] ... and my letter which Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Nisābūrī carried ... I see you erring regarding God,<sup>55</sup> and you will be amongst the losers ...

Ishāq, (may God have mercy upon you and those whom you represent)<sup>56</sup> I have explained for you and provided an exegesis, and I have acted towards you as to one who does not understand this matter (*hādhā al-amr*) [of the imamate] at all. And if you only understood ... some of what is in this letter, then you would split in anxiety and terror from the fear of God, and returning to the obedience of God ...

You, oh Ishāq, are my messenger (*rasūl*) to Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh (may God grant him success) who should act according to what arrived to him in my letter with Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Nisābūrī, God willing, and [you are] my messenger to yourself, and to those whom you represent in your region (*balad*) so that they act according to what came to you in my letter with Muḥammad b. Mūsā, God willing. And Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh will read this, my letter, as will those whom he represents in his region, so that they do not question me, and so that they are preserved from sin through obedience to God and so that they avert Satan from themselves through God and so that they will be obedient.

Many greetings to Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh and to you and to all of my followers (*mawālī*) ... and to whoever reads this, my letter, from amongst my followers from your region (*balad*) who belong to your administrative district (*nāhiya*) ... then let him pay what is due to us to Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh and let Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh carry that to al-Rāzī (may God be pleased with him) or to the person al-Rāzī names, for that is from my orders and my judgement, God willing.

Oh Ishāq, read this, our letter, to al-Bilālī (may God be pleased with him) for he is a trustworthy reliable man who knows what he needs to do, and read it to al-Maḥmūdī (may God preserve him) ... and if you arrive in Baghdad, then read it to al-Dihqān, our agent (*wakīl*) and our reliable man who collects (*yaqbiḍ*) money from our followers, and read this letter to whomever you can from amongst our followers and let whomever among them who wishes to, make a copy of it, God (most high) willing. And do not hide this matter from those amongst our followers who witness it, except for a satan who opposes them: do not scatter pearls between the trotters of ignoble swine! And we have made a rescript upon your letter with the delivery (*wa qad waqqa ‘nā fī kitābika bi-l-wuṣūl*) with the pious

<sup>55</sup> See Q 39:56.

<sup>56</sup> Literally, “whoever is behind you” (*man huwa warā’aka*).

supplication (*du‘ā*) for yourself and for the one whom you wished, and we have responded to our Shi‘a about the issue he raised (*‘an mas‘alatihī*),<sup>57</sup> praise God, for after right, there is nothing but error.

Do not exit the town (*balda*) until you convey to al-‘Amrī (RAA) my satisfaction with him and greet him ... for indeed he is the pure one, the trustworthy, the abstinent, who is close to us. Anything that is carried to us from the provinces goes through him [until] the end of his life, so that he can deliver it to us, praise God greatly.<sup>58</sup>

How can we interpret this rather complicated letter? It alludes to multiple separate lines of communication, allowing us to identify several related messages:

- (1) An earlier letter of appointment of the agent Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh.<sup>59</sup>
- (2) An earlier letter to the imam, which was a corporate petition on behalf of Ishāq’s whole local community, asking for dispensation from payment of certain imamic dues (*ḥuqūq*; perhaps the *khums*).<sup>60</sup> Our extant letter (No. 5) is written in response to this request.
- (3) A private petition or request for a supplication or prayer (*du‘ā*) to be made by the imam on behalf of Ishāq and another person (*li-man shi‘ta*), mentioned in the very final section of the letter. Ishāq’s request was presumably included along with the more public communication on behalf of his whole community. It is not clear if this was included as part of the corporate petition or was a separate document.
- (4) A rescript or responsa written directly on the original corporate petition (No. 2).
- (5) Our extant letter, which seems to have been written on a separate page from the responsa that was written upon the page of the original petition. This extant letter is an additional response to only one aspect

<sup>57</sup> The grammar here is peculiar. One would expect *‘an mas‘alatihā* to refer back to *al-shi‘a*. It is possible that he sends the reply to his followers in general, but in response to a question from an individual.

<sup>58</sup> Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2: 843–47.

<sup>59</sup> Kashshī’s *Rijāl* also preserves two further letters regarding the appointment of Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh, the new agent mentioned here. Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2: 847–48. Neither of these letters is addressed to Ibrāhīm himself, although one of them includes the entire text of the appointment letter sent to Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh for the benefit of its recipient, and another commends the new agent’s qualities and vehemently encourages the proper payment of the alms tax. Why do we have so much information about Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh’s appointment? I think it is just an accident of preservation. Although this new agent was obviously considered of some importance at this time and place, in the long run he seems to have been a non-entity, with few important acts mentioned in the biographical sources.

<sup>60</sup> See a similar letter from Jawād, justifying his taking of the *khums*. Hayes, “*Khums* letter,” citing Tūsī, *Istibṣār*.

of the corporate petition. The central function of our letter is to refuse the request in the corporate petition for dispensation from paying the alms tax, and to demand that the community continues to pay money to the imam via the newly appointed agent Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh.

- (6) Copies of this letter (No. 5) are expected to be made, with explicit sanction from the imam, for further distribution within the community.

The relationship between the different communications can therefore be mapped out as in Figure 7.1.

The first clear conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that the imam did not rely on just one man to reach a particular community. Instead, we see a number of roles that have hitherto tended to be conflated into the single category of “agent” (*wakīl*), or simply the “men” (*rijāl*) of the imam.<sup>61</sup> There is a distinction between the messenger (*rasūl*), who is the recipient of this letter, and the newly appointed agent (*wakīl*) of the local community, who is to collect the communities’ dues and send them on to a man known only as al-Rāzī, who presumably is also an agent, albeit closer to the imam in the hierarchy. This letter also refers to another messenger or agent

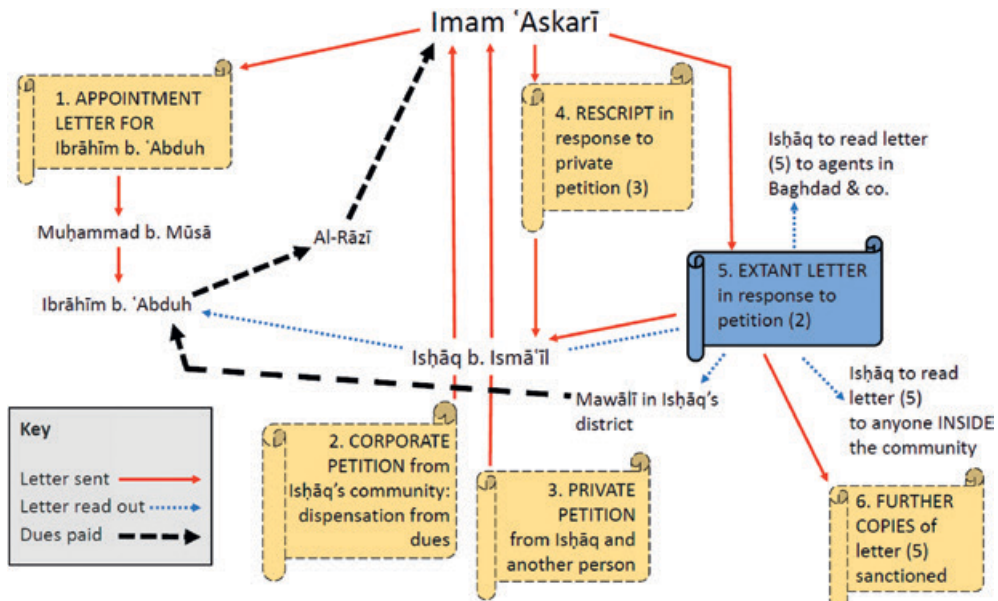


Figure 7.1 Correspondence mentioned in letter from al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarī to Ishāq b. Ismā‘īl.

<sup>61</sup> See e.g. Likayat Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 109–44.

named Muḥammad b. Mūsā who carried a letter of appointment to Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abduh.

It is noteworthy that the imam gives clear and detailed instructions for how his orders should be transmitted through his community. Thus, the recipient of our extant letter, Ishāq b. Ismā‘īl, is instructed to read his letter both to members of his own community, who were presumably behind the original request for dispensation, and to the new agent, presumably to keep him abreast of events and perhaps also to ensure, if not enforcement, a certain amount of oversight in this community’s fulfilment of its responsibilities. Ishāq’s delinquent community is required to pay their alms taxes to the new agent who, in turn, is required to send the money to another agent, al-Rāzī, who presumably will forward the money to another agent or perhaps bring it directly to the imam himself. Ishāq, meanwhile, is instructed to share his letter widely, to anyone who asks for a copy, to a set of named agents, mainly in Iraq, but also to anyone in the community. The exception is those “swine” who are in opposition to the followers of the imam, presumably referring to the followers of rival imams or excommunicants. This letter, then, provides a sense of the widest extent of the distribution of a letter that we see anywhere in the Imami sources from this period. While the extant letter responds to a very specific infraction, it is made to be exemplary, and the imam’s sermon in response is to be distributed widely in the community in Iraq, far beyond the community of Nishapur to which it is addressed. Even so, it is notable that, although the imam authorizes copies to be made, the process is controlled by targeting of particular nodes of authority in the community through which the distribution process should be channelled, and the imam orders that the letter should not be shown, as pearls before swine, to intransigent opponents. This indicates the restrictions placed on the community communications: even in this unusual case in which we have instructions for the wide dissemination of a letter, the imams’ messages are not meant to reach just anyone but should circulate according to instructions within a defined and bounded community. It seems to be left up to the agents and messengers themselves to determine who falls beyond the pale of the community, doubtless based upon local knowledge as well as earlier imamic orders.

Although presumably a trusted subordinate of the imam, the messenger in the letter, and the community he represents, appear to be on the verge of violating basic principles of participation in the Imami community: the payment of the canonical alms taxes to the imam. Ishāq seems complicit in his community’s request for dispensation. This is noteworthy, for it suggests

that even the imam's trusted agents and loyal followers were difficult to deal with sometimes, perhaps because their interests lay with the communities they were embedded in as much as with their imam.

Even allowing for rhetorical inflation, the terms with which the imam threatens his followers are stark; no less than the loss of salvation. Nonetheless, we should contextualize this dramatic soteriological framework within the toolkit of the tax-collector in other roughly contemporary contexts. The most directly comparable text among the physical documents from this era that have survived is an official's demand on papyrus for the *ṣadaqa-zakāt* alms tax from Muslims in villages in eighth-century Egypt, published by Sijpesteijn.<sup>62</sup> While Sijpesteijn notes that this papyrus's ornate religious rhetoric is "highly unusual in administrative and bureaucratic correspondence,"<sup>63</sup> we can see that its emphasis on the purifying role of *ṣadaqa-zakāt* is very comparable to the imam's rhetoric here, though without the threatening soteriological framing. For threats, we can go to the angry and threatening demands for taxes in the archive of letters on papyrus between the governor Qurra b. Sharīk and his local administrator the pagarch Basileios. In some ways the tone is similar to the imam's letter, but it is notable that Qurra has direct coercive means at his disposal. Thus, for example, in a case in which he is demanding the return of fugitives to their villages, Qurra (or rather Qurra's Grecophone scribe) writes:

God knows that if we find anyone after the return of our messenger not entered in the register which is dispatched from you, we shall deal out to you such requital as will crush you, both a very heavy fine and corporal chastisement, fining also the people of the place where the fugitive was found, with a fine which they are not able to support; and we will strip bare its headman and administrator and guards, after which we will deal out to them such corporal chastisement which must surpass their most extreme (fears). ... For such a man will count the dead happy in that they do not bear the calamities which will come upon him for his disobedience to our command and his reckless disregard of his own life.<sup>64</sup>

The themes of delinquency, disobedience and retribution are comparable, but Qurra is communicating across religious boundaries and so would have

<sup>62</sup> Petra Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 313–21.

<sup>63</sup> Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 182.

<sup>64</sup> Arietta Papacontantinou, "The Rhetoric of Power and the Voice of Reason: Tensions between Central and Local in the Correspondence of Qurra ibn Sharik." In *Official Epistolography and the Language(s) of Power. Proceedings of the 1st International Conference of the Research Network Imperium and Officium: Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom, University of Vienna, 10–12 November 2010*, eds. Stephan Procházka, Lucian Reinfandt and Sven Tost (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 270.

had no authority to threaten his Christian interlocutors with hellfire. Instead, Qurra's threats are distinctly corporal, vested in the coercive mechanisms of the state, whereas the imam speaks in the name of God and promises the ultimate, eschatological punishments for non-payment of the dues. Should we expect the Shi'i community to have taken the threats of their imam more seriously than the tax collectors of the caliph? One would think so, at least as far as their souls were concerned. However, people everywhere were involved in protecting their material interests even at the risk of provoking those in authority over them, and letters of demand are a common tool to persuade compliance with a tax regime, albeit the means of coercion available to governmental and non-governmental authorities are very different. Both governmental and non-governmental authorities had to rely on functionaries who were embedded in local communities and whose loyalties might have been strained in various different directions. Thus, just as Qurra threatens his functionary Basileios with corporal punishment, the imam feels the need to threaten his messenger Ishāq with punishment in the hereafter. Both cases speak to the difficulty of arranging fiscal systems at a distance.

## Conclusion

I have focused here on a few quoted letters, and reports regarding letters in the Imami Shi'i community in the ninth and tenth centuries CE. I have focused on the idea of "circular letters," but while these appear to have been directed at whole communities (albeit in a carefully directed, targeted way), most imamic letters that were transmitted are targeted at individuals. As we have seen, the imams did in many ways operate in similar ways to their contemporaries in governmental administration and in the administration of other religious communities. This may seem obvious. We should expect the imams to act like their contemporaries. However, there is a common assumption of Shi'i exceptionalism among scholars who work on early Islamic history, which tends to separate discussions of the regulation of life in the empire from internal Shi'i events. This is partly due to scholars ignoring Shi'i texts. It is also a factor of specialists in Shi'i studies ignoring social history to focus instead on the development of doctrine, ideas and narratological elements within the sources. However, the letters between the imams and his followers are, I would suggest, a particularly rich source for understanding the social life of letters in the early Islamic empire in general. Some of the details of

letter transmission are peculiar to the Imami Shi'i community, while some are shared with the dominant administrative culture, and other elements are more similar to epistolary exchanges within non-Muslim minority communities, known, for example, from the letters between the Jews of the Geniza. Comparing these sources allows us to get a more precise sense of what was common to the epistolary and administrative cultures in the empire, and what depended on the structural dynamics of a particular community. The letters analysed here indicate the existence of a relatively complex organizational web in the Imami Shi'i community, whose efficacy was greatly dependent upon the trustworthiness of the individuals representing the claims of the imam to the constituencies in which they were embedded. The circular letters of the imams do illustrate that they partook in the common necessity for religious and political leaders to be able to extend their authority out into geographically distant zones (e.g. from Iraq to Nishapur) through the available techniques and technologies of the day: epistolary administration. However, as we have seen, the particular situation and structures of the Imami Shi'i created particular dynamics. Thus, the Imam did not ask for his letters to be read out in public places but to be read in targeted ways, with careful instructions made for the production of copies, all within the web of agents and messengers appointed by the Imams and those trusted by their delegates. Even at the greatest extent of dissemination of a message, we see an imam cautioning his messengers to keep the pearls of his words away from the swine who opposed him. Such precautions testify to the implications of the fragile, interstitial nature of the Imami community within imperial society.

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