



## ‘ABBĀS B. ‘ALĪ B. ABŪ ṬĀLEB

‘ABBĀS B. ‘ALĪ B. ABŪ ṬĀLEB, a half brother of Imam Ḥosayn who fought bravely at the battle of Karbalā. ‘Abbās was killed, according to most traditions, on the day of ‘Āšūrā (10 Moḥarram 61/10 October 680) while trying to bring back water from the Euphrates river to quench the unbearable thirst of the besieged Ahl-e Bayt (holy family). As in the case of other martyrs of Karbalā, the heroic conduct and death of this outstanding figure have given rise, in both Sunni and Shi‘i circles, to legendary accounts from which it is very hard to unravel the historical truth. The major difficulty arises from the fact that the main primary sources on the events of Karbalā (Ṭabarī and Balāḍorī) do not mention the details of ‘Abbās’s death. A brief reference by Shaikh al-Mofīd says that, in the ultimate episode of the battle, ‘Abbās went together with Ḥosayn toward the river; separated from his brother, he fought boldly before being killed. His body was buried by people from Banū Asad at the place where he was killed and where his tomb (and later his shrine) was erected (see *al-Eršād*, Tehran, 1377/1957-58, pp. 224-25, 227). As in the case of other martyrs of Karbalā, his head was brought to Yazīd in Damascus. One tradition claims that his head was later buried in the cemetery of Bāb al-Ṣaḡīr in Damascus. His mother, Omm-al-banīn, belonged to the Vahīd family of the tribe of the Banū ‘Āmer; and he had three full brothers who were killed just before him: ‘Abdallāh, Ja‘far, and ‘Oṭmān (Mofīd, loc. cit.; Dīnavarī, *al-Aḵbār al-ṭewāl*, Cairo, 1330/1911-12, pp. 254f.).

The early evolution of his saga is difficult to trace, although his surname Saqqā (“Water Carrier”) appears in ancient sources (Mofīd, *al-Eḵtešāš*, Tehran,



1379/1959-60, p. 82). The traditions later followed regarding the circumstances of his martyrdom seem to go back to a nucleus of narratives popular in circles practicing *fotovvat* (a kind of chivalry) in the late ‘Abbasid period; these spread to Turco-Persian areas among various socioreligious groups (*akī*, *fetyān*, etc.) and ultimately among Sufi orders. Most of these narratives are known by their titles, but an idea of their contents may be gathered from the Arabic historical romance of Ebn Ṭā’ūs al-Ṭā’ūsī (tr. F. Wüstenfeld, *Der Tod des Husein ben ‘Alī und die Rache*, Göttingen, 1883). Its author claims to transmit traditions from Abū Meḵnaf, the main authority for most historical writings on the period. According to this account—which may reflect some historical truth—‘Abbās was killed on the eve of ‘Āšūrā in a desperate attempt to provide water for the besieged. Fighting alone against numerous foes, he had his right hand severed by a sword cut, then the left; seizing his sword in his mouth, he went on fighting until he was killed. In the *Rawzat al-šohadā* (q.v.; completed in 908/1502-03), the major source for the recitation of the passions of the martyrs of Karbalā during the mourning months (*rawzat-kānī*), Ḥosayn Vā’eẓ Kāšefī seems to follow the “historical” tradition more strictly than other writers by mentioning ‘Abbās’s death on 10 Moḥarram and by shuffling the chronology only slightly, making ‘Abbās the sixty-eighth martyr (before Moḥammad b. ‘Alī, ‘Alī-Akbar and ‘Alī-Aṣḡar). Nevertheless, Kāšefī mentions ‘Abbās’s heroic sally on 9 Moḥarram and follows essentially the “Mesopotamian” tradition regarding the water motif (ed. Ramažānī, Tehran, 1341 Š./1962).

As they appear in later narratives, ‘Abbās’s semilegendary figure and character result from a mingling of the aforesaid heterogeneous elements with frequent extrapolations. He is often called by his *konya*, Abu’l-Faẓl, or by his surname, Qamar Banī Hāšem (“Moon of the Hashemites”). He is described, according to *fotovvat* ideals, as a very handsome man, brave, strong, and tall, his legs reaching the ground when he rode his white stallion (a tradition believed in Azarbaijan and India). ‘Abbās is said to have inherited ‘Alī’s boldness, to have always carried the victorious standard on the battlefield (thence his surname ‘Alam-dār, “Standard-Bearer”), and to have killed many enemies (eighty, according to the *Rawzat al-šohadā*) before being martyred. Traditions say that when Ḥosayn heard him cry at the last gasp he uttered the words: “My backbone is broken.” The names of his murderers, Zayd b. Varqā’ Ḥanafī and Ḥakīm b. al-Ṭofayl Sanānī (see *al-Eršād*), are sometimes erroneously transmitted by popular narratives.

As one of the central participants in the drama of Karbalā, ‘Abbās is celebrated



both in *ta'zīa* and related Moḥarram mourning rituals as the water carrier of the Ahl-e Bayt and the standard-bearer of Ḥosayn. A certain parallel has been noticed between Moḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīya—standard-bearer and champion of 'Alī in his own saga—and 'Abbās fulfilling the same warrior functions near Ḥosayn, who is seen as essentially involved in a spiritual combat (see bibliog.: Calmard, p. 368, n. 813). *Ta'zīa* scripts dedicate a complete cycle to 'Abbās's deeds from birth to martyrdom (see bibliog.: Rossi and Bombaci, *Elenco*). From the blessing (*baraka*) attached to his person derive some “miracle” themes celebrated in *ta'zīa*. The representation of his martyrdom, generally performed on the eve of 'Āšūrā (i.e., the evening of the ninth day, Tāsū'ā), features the most dramatic scenes found in *ta'zīa* acting, particularly the scene picturing the veiled 'Abbās testing 'Alī-Akbar's valor. There is even a kind of theater in the theater in the story of a purported Hindu actor playing the role of 'Abbās ('Abbās-e Hendī, *Elenco*, no. 3).

The cult of 'Abbās incorporates many features related to water and fertility. In Kāšefī's *Fotovvatnāma-ye solṭānī* (ed. M. J. Mahīūb, Tehran, 1350 Š./1971), he ranks in the *selsela* (lineage) of the *saqqā* saints, second in line after 'Alī; those who, out of devotion for the martyrs of Karbalā, become *saqqā*, i.e., give water to the thirsty as an act of charity, “do it in imitation of 'Abbās-e 'Alī.” But there is no mention of his name in a later treatise on water carriers popular in Indo-Persian corporations (see A. M. Kassim, “Etudes sur les corporations musulmanes indo-persanes,” *REI*, 1927, pp. 249f.). Invocations such as “*Ya Ḥaẓrat-e 'Abbās!*” (O, exalted 'Abbās) or “*Ya Abu'l-Faẓl!*” are generally engraved on the metal hand (*panja*) with outstretched fingers symbolizing the Ahl-e Bayt fixed on top of the standards (*'alam*) carried in Moḥarram processions. Special votive ribbons are attached to these *'alams*, and ex-votos are brought to their bases by women on the eve of 'Āšūrā to obtain protection for their infant children. Parents dedicate their young sons to the activity of supplying water to attendants at the Moḥarram ceremonies in memory of Ḥaẓrat-e 'Abbās. Such acts fulfill vows made when seeking children's recovery from illness. Devotees used to offer special oblation (*nadr*) consisting of a certain amount of bread and yoghurt—*nān o māst*, colloquially *nūn-o-mās* (*nadr-e Ḥaẓrat-e 'Abbās*)—to be increased each year. 'Abbās's popularity among social groups such as the Dāš (short for *dādāš* “brother”) of Tehran, who had special devotion and invocations for 'Abbās and Ḥorr (q.v.), is probably a remote reminder of the *fotovvat* ideology. The Dāš's attachment to 'Abbās was particularly motivated by his refusal to receive from the accursed Šemr the ultimatum addressed by Ebn Zīād to Ḥosayn. In *ta'zīa-kānī*, the actor



representing ‘Abbās could play the part of Ḥorr also (on these *naḍrs* and the *Dāš*, see Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī-ye man*, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1343 Š./1964, I, pp. 285f.). Other widespread practices of invocation to ‘Abbās have been observed in Persia. Thus, to avenge oneself or to harm somebody, one may say: “*Yā Ḥaẓrat-e ‘Abbās!*” or “*Ḥaẓrat-e ‘Abbās kūr-et kone!*” (“May H. A. blind you!”). It is believed that ‘Abbās punishes wicked people by blinding them (see Henri Massé, *Croyances et coutumes persanes*, Paris, 1938, I, p. 121). It seems that in recent years the making of a vow in relation to ‘Abbās has become more common among women, who, to fulfill a vow, organize religious gatherings called *sofra Ḥaẓrat-e ‘Abbās* (see [SOFRA](#)), during which food is shared (see Gustav Thaiss, “Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The Drama of Husain,” in *Scholars, Saints and Sufis*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972, pp. 352ff.).

‘Abbās’s likeness, generally as a warrior riding his white stallion, has been represented in many ways (sometimes while cleaving his enemies to the waist with a single blow of his sword) in frescoes, paintings on wooden tablets, glass, and cloth (*qalamkār*), oil-painted *šamāyel* used for *pardadārī* (q.v.), on standards, in ceramics, lithographed illustrations, and so on. *Saqqāqānas* (water fountains), often built near a *tekyā* (hall for the Moḥarram ceremonies), are generally dedicated to Ḥaẓrat-e ‘Abbās. Such votive chapels (few are extant) are sometimes decorated with tilework (*kāšīkārī*) scenes depicting ‘Abbās’s heroic deeds and martyrdom similar to those found on *tekyā* walls.

‘Abbās’s shrine is located in the town of Karbalā on the northeast side of Imam Ḥosayn’s mausoleum. Both shrines are built on a mound overlooking the town. Since they are visited by many pilgrims practically all year long, both have numerous servants (*sayyeds*, *mollās*, etc.) for upkeep and administration. ‘Abbās’s shrine is built in a vast enclosure. Access to it is obtained through a succession of portals richly decorated with stalactites and enameled tiles, some of which copy ancient originals. The grave itself, covered with a golden dome (formerly an enameled faience cupola), has been recently renovated (1385/1965-66). As is the case for other martyrs of Karbalā, there are special prayers and rituals to be performed at his grave; and important Muslim personalities (*‘olamā*’, sultans, ministers, are buried in the precinct of his shrine.

‘Abbās’s memory is further celebrated in various other areas and communities—for example, among the Azarbaijanis of Caucasia; in many parts of Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, where Sunnis and Hindus participate



actively in most Shi'i rituals; and, more broadly speaking, wherever Moḥarram ceremonies are performed (i.e., in countries ranging from the West Indies to the island of Java).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

See also: Eugène Aubin, *La Perse d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, 1908, pp. 376f.

Ivar Lassy, *The Muharram Mysteries among the Azerbaijan Turks of Caucasia*, Helsingfors, 1916, pp. 38f., 52, 113, etc. J

affur Shureef, *Islam in India, or the Qanun-i Islam*, tr. Herklots, Oxford, 1921, pp. 160, 162.

Henri Massé, *Anthologie persane*, Paris, 1950, pp. 390-92.

Ettore Rossi and Alessio Bombaci, *Elenco di drammi religiosi persiani (fondo mss. Vaticani Cerulli)*, Vatican City, 1961 (on the Chodzko, Pelly, and Litten collections, see index, pp. 354f.).

Javād Şafīnežād, *Ṭālebābād* (monograph on a village), Institute of Social Studies and Researches, no. 38, Tehran, 1345 Š./1966, p. 446.

Peter Chelkowski, *Tārīk va janba-ye adabī-e ta'zīa* (diss., University of Tehran, 1347 Š./1968), pp. 180-92.

Hassan ul-Ameene, *Islamic Shi'ite Encyclopaedia* IV, Beirut, 1973, pp. 172, 180f., 192, 197, 209f.

Jean Calmard, *Le cult de l' Imām Ḥusayn: étude sur la commémoration du drame de Karbalā dans l'Iran pré-safavide* (diss., University of Paris [Sorbonne], 1975), pp. 347, 364, 368f., and index (for late popular narratives).